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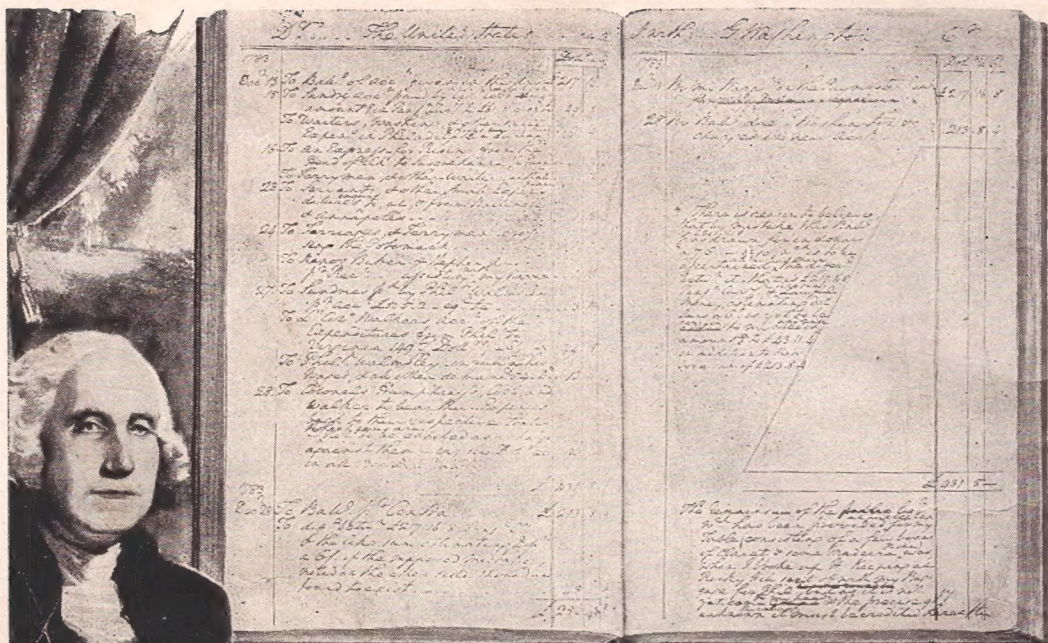
44 Western

MAGAZINE

MARCH

CARTON MAGAZINE
EXCHANGE
1643 E. TUSC

**ONE AGAINST THE
GUN-WOLF PACK**
DRAMATIC FRONTIER NOVEL
by LEE BOND
**TRIGGER OLIVER-
DEATH'S STRAWBOSS**
by ENNEN REAVES HALL
COLEMAN•THOMPSON•CHADWICK



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44 Western

MAGAZINE

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Vol. 12

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★ .44 TALK ★

"THE OKAMULGEES are on the warpath!" The hair-raising cry echoed down the dusty street just as the sun went down, blood-red, behind the 'dobe shacks at the edge of town. With a crash of hobnailed boots, old Borax Brainard took his feet off the porch rail of the Lode Star Hotel and peered through bushy eyebrows at the freckled youngster dancing excitedly in the street.

"What's that yuh say, son?" he asked unbelievably, "Okamulgee trouble? Ain't seen no injuns in warpaint since '79."

"Take a good look, then, Pop," the kid said and pointed off in the distance to a small cloud of dust rising on the distant plain. The ancient prospector, whose weathered face bore two faint blue arrow scars, shambled out into the road and shaded his eyes against the dying sun.

He muttered, then caught unmistakable glints of flashing rifle barrels, the purposeful thunderous beat of marching men.

The old man straightened up and sighed. "Son," he snorted scornfully, "cain't you larn to tell red Injuns from army regulars?"

"They are, too, Injuns!" the boy said.

And now the heavy-shod, khaki-clad figures were tramping five abreast down the rutted wagon road, and there was no mistaking the bronzed features.

"Injuns in the army! It just cain't be!" Old Borax marveled.

A young captain sighted the old man's campaign ribbons he wore so proudly on his faded woolen shirt, and he saluted him smartly as the regiment passed. Stunned, Old Borax returned the courtesy with his stiff, rheumatic arm.

"A Sioux, at that." An' there goes a Blackfeet, an' a Crow an' a Osage. . . . an' there, by cracky, goes an Apache!" he gasped. "Lord A'mighty I got this very ribbon that I'm a wearin' when we chased Geronimo north of the Tonto Rim! An' now probably his great-grandson has gone off to take my place in a war I'm too old tuh fight!"

The nation's fighting legend is rich with the strange, primitive names of the bronzed Americans who were pushed almost into the Pacific Ocean before the land-hungry tides of white immigrants remembered that they were civilized, and extended a shame-faced pipe of peace. Black Hawk, Sitting

Bull, Little Deer, Powhatan, Red Cloud and Geronimo are in our history books beside the names of the pioneers who feared, but respected them. It is not surprising that their descendants are first-class fighting men.

We have to thank the mighty miracle of the American melting pot that the grandsons of the men old Borax helped campaign against in the Southwest frontier bear no grudge. They've promptly shouldered arms and marched off to fight a common enemy.

Nor have they entirely escaped the scorn that has held over in ignorance. There is the story of the young officer who still thought Indians were lazy brown men who sat around in the sun making pottery bowls for tourists, and never bothered to learn to "speak American."

He said to his Indian subordinate who was watching a drill squad on the parade grounds, "We make-um heap big war dance, go catch-um Jap."

But the young Carlyle graduate was too polite, or perhaps too diplomatic, to embarrass his superior officer: He merely grunted and said, "Uh, many scalps!" And it is recorded that the sudden gleam of anticipation in the Indian's black eyes caused the officer to look somewhat alarmed.

Greatest tribute to the thousands of Indian fighting men from the southwest who are proudly wearing the G.I. uniform today is the battle cry of the paratroopers.

Reckless, proud, careless of sudden death, the men who wear the parachute insignia are among the finest that are ours. And the war shout that goes with them as they plunge into whirling space is the name of the bravest, most savage fighter of them all: "Geronimo!"

—THE EDITOR

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DEAD MEN'S EMPIRE

By George E. Jones



Grave-markers, crumbling in once-prosperous Skidoo's boothill, are the grim reminders of a bloody but glorious past—Where hell-roaring boom-campers fought and died to build a new and untamed empire.



JOE SIMPSON, youthful badman of Skidoo, staggered out of the saloon in which he owned a half interest, revenge a branding iron in his whiskey-blurred mind. He stumbled into the general store across the street. His gun barked once. Jim Arnold, the quiet, friendly storekeeper, slumped against a pile of clothes, blood staining the floor where he fell.

A few mornings later, Joe Simpson was found hanging from the arm of a telephone post. He had been shot and then hanged in a quarrel over a twenty dollar gold-piece.

Today all that remains of Skidoo, roaring gold town at the turn of the century, are two rambling tin miner's shacks, the local boothill—and memories. Joe Simpson is buried in boothill. So is Jim Arnold. The grave markers—all unnatural deaths—are almost obliterated by time. Skidoo, except for one lone mill still operating, is covered under the silence of desert dust.

During the boom there were five roaring saloons, an assay office, a bank, two stores, a restaurant and a pool hall. There was housing for forty families, and prospectors, wild with the dream of strikes, pitched tents at the site of the mines.

Pete Augereberry, in July, 1905, came out of Death Valley on a prospecting trip and camped overnight on a lone hill. Next morning, he picked up a lump of quartz to throw at one of his runaway burros. He is credited with being the first finder of gold in the territory known as the Skidoo Mining District. Gold output averaged about fifteen thousand dollars a month until the

year 1916, when the mines came to an abrupt end because of a judgment brought against them by W. B. Gray, for loss of valuable ore from his ground. The Skidoo Mines were staked out in January, 1906, by Ramsey and McDonald. Later, the same year, they were sold to Bob Montgomery, Nevada prospector who had made good in Rhyolite, for sixty thousand dollars.

During the years while the town was booming, it was still without a name. Several were suggested and then Mrs. Montgomery, in a Los Angeles theater one night, heard Eddie Foy use the phrase "23-skidoo," and from then on the town was known as Skidoo.

The ghosts of Walker and Johnson, desert rats, remain buried beneath the alkali dust of Emigrant Wash, nearby. One day they walked away from camp, never to be heard of again. A Frenchman wandered across the almost volcanic heat of the desert floor and within five hours was a raving maniac. In the canyon are bones and dry, taut skin, grisly reminders of death.

Driving winds and gales, blowing sand and man's timeless battle with the heat of the sun, have leveled the town of Skidoo, once the metropolis of the Skidoo Mining District. The one mill, still producing, stands as a defiant monument to its memorable past.

If that mill could speak—it might tell of the glorious past once enacted in the now dead Skidoo . . . of the rugged men who fought and died to pave the road to a new, untamed empire!



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Lee Bond



**Stirring Novel of a
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CHAPTER ONE

Terror on the Trail

BILL DEAN jerked erect in his saddle as he spotted the short, fat man. The man had a six-shooter in his hand, and the gun was levelled at Dean's middle. Bill remembered, then, that the buckskin he was riding had snorted and fiddle-footed nervously a few seconds before "Fatty" stepped out into the trail.

Dean silently cursed himself for not having been warned by the buckskin's actions. He felt as if the money belt beneath his shirt was suddenly bulged and heavy. He was panicky for a moment as he realized that he had been caught flat-footed. But his panic soon vanished and once again Bill was thinking clearly.

His gray eyes took on a polished-steel

look as he studied the round, red face behind the gun. He didn't like what he saw in that thick-lipped, button-nosed face.

"Light down, pilgrim!" the fat man ordered. Then without taking his eyes off Dean called, "Watch this huckleberry, Lon."

"I been watchin' him," a thin-edged voice answered somewhere behind Bill.

"Got his brand read?"

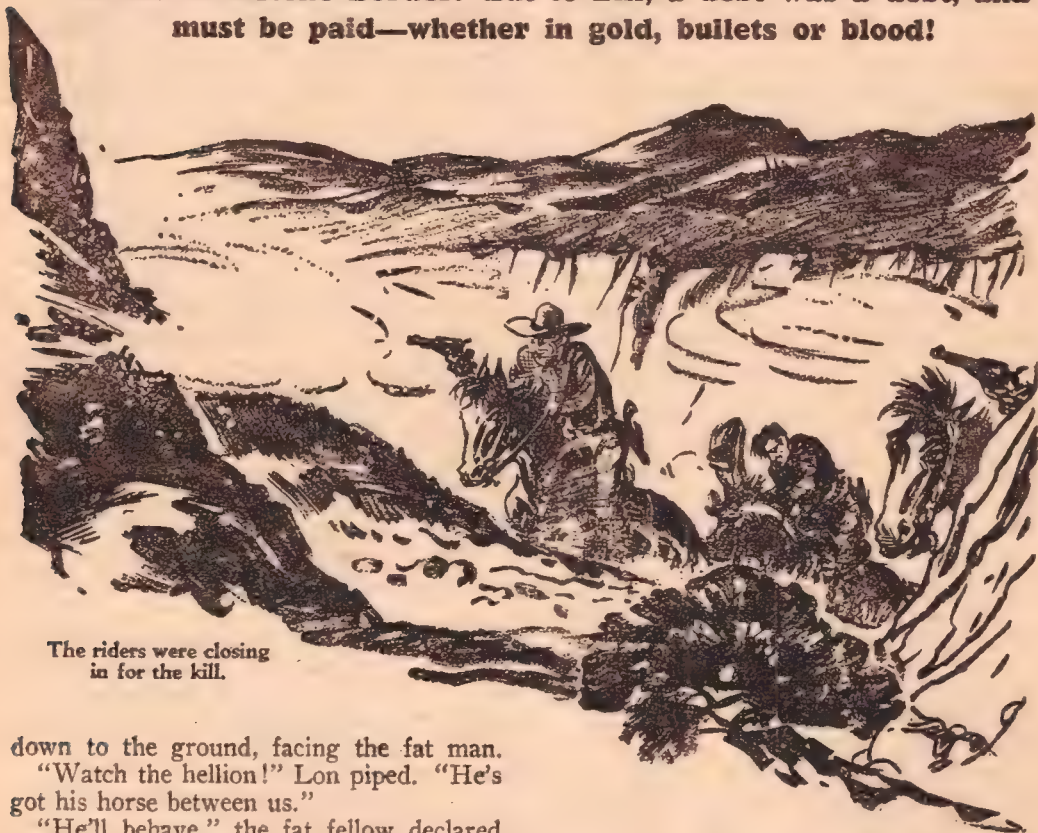
"Yep!" Lon replied. "Diamond D iron on his horse's hip. He rode a long trail, and has travelled light."

"Get down," the fat man repeated. This time his voice was almost gentle.

Bill did not argue. He swung his right leg up over the saddle horn and came

ONE AGAINST THE GUN-WOLF PACK

Bill Dean rode into Mariposa Basin, to find that the rancher who had once guarded him from the outlaw trail had become boss of the deadliest pack of buscaderos ever to bring red hell to the Brimstone Border. But to Bill, a debt was a debt, and must be paid—whether in gold, bullets or blood!



The riders were closing in for the kill.

down to the ground, facing the fat man.

"Watch the hellion!" Lon piped. "He's got his horse between us."

"He'll behave," the fat fellow declared lazily.

Bill heard boot heels slogging rapidly behind him. Then the second man was facing him—a scrawny, thin-faced fellow with black snags of teeth showing when he kinked his lips into a sneering grin.

"Keep him covered, Boozer, while I pull that six-shooter off him," the scrawny Lon ordered.

"What's the idea?" Dean asked sharply.

"We'll talk after you're minus that gun," the fat Boozer told him.

"If this is a holdup, you two are wastin' your time," Dean grinned at them.

He tried to make it sound natural, as if he wasn't worried at all. But inside he was shaking, and the money belt under his shirt seemed to weigh a ton. He glanced desperately towards the rim of the vast, fertile basin that lay just ahead of him.

FIVE years of bone-wrenching, heart-breaking work had given Bill Dean a stake that would see his dream of having a

little place in Mariposa Basin come true. And now, on the very rim of the Basin he had not seen in the five years it had taken him to make that stake, he was being stuck up by a pair of gun-wise hellions who would take that money the minute they found it on him.

"You'll get hurt if you act up, feller!" Lon warned, as he passed behind Bill.

Bill sensed what that meant in time to lurch. But the six-shooter Lon had swung, caught him on the side of the head in a glancing blow that stretched him out in the trail. Lon lunged in, cursing him in a gritty voice. He struck again, and the world pin-wheeled before Dean's throbbing eyes. Yet he was not completely unconscious. He felt the two men tusseling him around, and heard Lon's shrill whoop of triumph when they found the money belt.

Bill clawed at the two shadowy figures, but could not get his hands on either one of them. Then his brain was clearing, and he sat up slowly, a dull roaring in his head that was not entirely due to shock. Blood was running down his face from a gash Lon's gun had made in his scalp, and his ribs felt as if they had caved in.

Dean looked at Boozer and Lon. They were squatting on their heels in the trail. They had time to count all the money and return it to the belt, which was draped over Boozer's thick knee. And Bill knew that they had no intentions of letting him ride away from here. He saw that, in Boozer's leering eyes, and in the way Lon was licking his thin lips and shooting nervous glances around, as if he feared someone might come along and see what was about to happen.

Dean groaned, lifted his hands to his head, and swayed from side to side as if he were still groggy from the gun whipping.

"We better get our chore done right now, Boozer." Lon's voice was jerky.

"No, you fool!" Boozer retorted. "Put that gun down. We've got to find out if anybody in the Basin is expectin' this gent."

"This feller ain't nothin' but a saddle tramp," Lon snorted.

"You'll get hurt some day, Lon, takin' people for face value," Boozer sighed. "That feller is nery and cool-headed."

"I reckon his head ain't so cool right

now," Lon scoffed. "Look at him topple over."

Dean had been moaning and mumbling, hoping the murderous pair would think he was still too groggy to hear what they were saying. And as Lon talked, Bill seemed to lose his balance completely. He fell over on his side, still moaning and muttering, but his mind was working like forked lightning.

He had arrived in Mariposa Basin a little over five years ago, a tough young fool with a bullet hole in his leg and a head full of crazy ideas about making money the easy way. Even getting a bullet in his leg when he and a couple of other knot-heads had tried to grab a bunch of horses away from professional horse thieves had not convinced Bill Dean that he could not make big money running with a tough crowd. But that bullet hole had become infected, and he had wound up at old Tim Shane's big Boxed S down in Mariposa Basin. Bill had been laid up at Tim's place for nearly a month before the leg was well enough to let him ride out again.

Shane's tongue lashings and Ma Shane's tender care had done something that bullet wounds could never do. And there was copper-haired Edna Shane, with her red-lipped smile. Bill had tried to tell himself when he left, that she was only a kid. Edna Shane had been fifteen or a little over, while Bill had already turned twenty.

THE day he left, he had reached down to tug one of Edna's heavy curls, aiming to tease her by asking her if she thought she'd ever get that stubby little nose to grow up so it would fit the rest of her face. But Edna had put her slim arms around his neck, kissed him full on the mouth, and told him to go out some place, buck the devil out of his soul, then come back and steal enough cows from Tim to get started on his own.

Bill had ridden away with a crooked grin pulling at his lips, telling himself that a girl Edna's age didn't know what she was talking about.

After he reached New Mexico and started hunting wild horses, Bill had continued to tell himself that he was only hiding out for a spell, until the horse thieves he had tangled with in Arizona forgot the matter. But he became downright miserly, and

somehow kept putting off the job of hunting up his old, wild companions and joining them in some of the stunts they had talked about trying.

Whenever he found himself checking off another year and wondering about Edna, he would still pretend he didn't give a hoot if she had a dozen handsome cowhands on the string, or if she married the whole bunch at once. When Bill got to thinking about things like that, he generally picked up a hard fall by not paying attention to where he sent his horse, or got thrown out of the corral if he was breaking some wild-eyed hunk of four-legged dynamite.

The day he had finally tallied up his savings and figured it was enough to start a little outfit without too much debt on the side, he lit out of New Mexico as fast as his big-buckskin horse could take him. His heart thumped wildly as he rode towards the rimrock from which he could look into Mariposa Basin and see Tim Shane's big ranch. And just thinking that Edna was twenty now, and that she was likely married to some fellow, had been hitting Bill so hard he had not paid any attention to his horse's snorting and prancing. Then these two gun slicks had jumped him and taken away his precious hoard of hard-earned money. Now they meant to kill him.

Bill looked out at them through barely parted lids. They were still squatting and watching him. Getting nervous, he noticed. They'd make their kill within minutes—maybe seconds. Desperately he cudgeled his aching brain for some scheme, for a plan that would even hold a ghost of a chance. But they were armed, and his holster was empty.

Bill could see his money belt, rolled up like a fat snake and lying beside a rock. He thought again of Mariposa Basin there below him, of Tim and Ma Shane, of Edna's coppery curls and laughing green eyes.

Bill's fingers began feeling around the ground, scratching and clawing frantically for anything that might serve as a weapon. But there was nothing within his reach, and he saw the two men getting to their feet.

"Maybe I hit him too hard," Lon said. "It's takin' him too long to snap out of it."

"Get the canteen off his saddle and pour water over his head," Boozer directed.

"We've got to get him awake and find out if anyone sent for him, or—"

He broke off, and through barely parted lids, Bill saw the round, red face turn directly towards him, and felt the impact of those hidden little eyes.

"On second thought, Lon, don't bother wakin' him up," Boozer, said evenly. "We've got to shut his mouth whether anybody sent for him or not. Get one of his feet, and I'll get the other. A dive over the rimrock, yonder, will settle his career."

CHAPTER TWO

Plague From Hell

THERE were only scant, fleeting moments for Bill to think out his plan, but he knew what it had to be—knew that he had one chance in maybe a thousand of saving himself. He waited until Boozer and Lon were standing over him. Their guns were holstered now. He groaned, then writhed sluggishly. That his legs drew up, did not attract undue attention.

"Hurry it up!" Lon jabbered. "He'll wake up if we don't get goin'."

Lon and Boozer came forward another pace. They stooped at the same time, each reaching for one of Bill Dean's dusty boots. They got the boots—but not the way they had planned. Legs that were trained to grip the heaving barrel of a bucking horse suddenly flexed, driving them up and out, spiked heels foremost.

Boozer's sharp eyes saw the danger at the first rippling motion of muscles beneath Dean's sun-faded Levi's. Boozer tried to spring backwards to safety. He did succeed in spoiling Bill's aim to some extent. Bill had aimed at the flat nose in Boozer's round face. He missed the fat man's nose, but caught him in the pit of the stomach with a force that sent him sprawling.

Bill's other boot struck where he wanted it to land—Lon's snaggly teeth. The thin gunman sprawled five feet from where he had stood, screaming oaths and spitting broken teeth.

Bill was rolling to his feet now, a lean streak of fighting fury as he dived on Lon. He smashed a fist to the pointed chin, ripped his own gun from Lon's waistband, and spun on around as if the whole thing

had been one continuous graceful motion.

His eyes were steely grey, and there was a twisted grin tugging at his lips. His cocked six-shooter levelled at Boozer just as the fat man was reaching for his gun. Boozer nodded slowly, brought his hands forward and laid them, palms up, on his legs.

"You're smart," Boozer said wearily. "Wish I could team up with a gent like you instead of a fool like him."

Bill squatted down and snicked Lon's gun from its holster. He patted the scrawny tough over swiftly, but found no hidden weapons. And in doing all of that, Bill had never taken his eyes, nor the yawning bore of his cocked six-shooter from Boozer for more than a fraction of a second at a time.

Boozer smiled wryly, and shook his big, flat-topped head. He had lost his hat when he fell, and Bill saw that Boozer's head was almost bald. Yet the man was not old in years.

"You dirty buzzard!" Lon shrieked. "You've kicked half my teeth out. If I had a gun in my fist—"

He let his threats go unfinished when Bill turned his back and walked over to Boozer.

"Get up!" Bill ordered.

"I was beginnin' to wonder if you could talk," Boozer chuckled, and got to his feet.

Bill flipped the six-shooter from the fat man's holster, and found a stubby belly gun inside his shirt front. He tucked both weapons under his own belt, where Lon's gun already reposed. Then Bill got his money belt and backed away to his horse.

"Get down there with your fat friend," he ordered Lon.

The little tough cursed him through torn lips, but got to his feet and staggered down the trail to where his side-kick stood smiling sourly.

"What's funny?" Lon quavered.

"We are," Boozer declared. "We got ourselves into this. All the orders we had was to stop any man who came along, ask him a few questions, then either send him down to see the boss or else send him hikin' back the way he come."

"Cut out the talk and start climbin' out of your clothes," Bill ordered.

Bill had his money belt on, his shirt-tail tucked in, and a grin on his lips that spelled

trouble for the pair who had meant to murder him.

"What?" Both outlaws exclaimed.

"Peel yourselves to the hide," he repeated.

"Damned if we'll do it!" Lon hollered.

"Then I'll do the job for you—after I've had the pleasure of pistol whippin' you to sleep."

HE PULLED his six-shooter and started forward. Boozer sighed heavily, and began disrobing. A few moments later he stood huge and pink, watching somberly while Lon wiggled out of his last garment.

"Now back up," Bill said, and grinned at the way they both limped and cursed when they had to move barefoot over the rocky soil.

Bill squatted on his heels, emptied the pockets of each pile of clothing, then tossed boots to the two uneasy toughs. He stuffed all the rest of the garments into Boozer's big pants, tied the legs at the bottoms, and lashed the bundle on behind his saddle.

"Now crawl into your boots," he told the sullen pair. "I'm leavin' your Stetsons, too. I see your horses yonder in the rocks, so I'll collect them and be on my way."

"Wait!" Boozer brayed. "You can't leave us like this. We'd look like hell, sashayin' home with nothin' but our boots and hats on."

"Then you're due to look like hell," Bill told them.

He rode off, chuckling as he listened to their wild cursing. He got their two horses, and there was no longer any mirth in his eyes as he looped up the reins of the two saddlers and sent them down the trail ahead of him.

Bill stretched up in the stirrups, his heart beginning to pound as he neared the rim of Mariposa Basin. Then he was at the notch in the tall, red bluffs at last, letting his buckskin follow the other two horses down the winding gap. Bill's eyes reached out to the basin, and he forgot the throbbing of his head and the stiff feel of the dry blood that was smeared along the right side of his face.

Mariposa Basin was like a vast emerald sea caught between the hills. Bill smelled the fragrance of the damp, rich earth, and found himself laughing shakily, trying to crowd the horses on faster. But when

he was in the basin at last, something happened to that elation. Here, along the upper reaches of the basin, there had been five farms when he left. He could still see the dim squares that had been fields, and yonder ahead a stone chimney stood bleak and alone.

"Burned out!" Bill said softly, and ran his narrowing gaze on down the Basin, searching out the spot where another house had stood. There was no house there now. A circle of dead, blackened snags marked the spot. Those things that were now black snags had once been spreading shade trees around a neat log farmhouse.

Bill's jaws clamped down hard, and his spurs lifted the buckskin to a livelier pace.

The heavily timbered slopes that marched up to the rimrocks from the valley floor, showed no fireburns. And by the time Bill saw the blackened remnants of the fifth farmstead, he knew that no forest or grass fire had been responsible.

He had meant to follow those two horses ahead of him until he discovered where they belonged, thereby learning who had hired the two men who had tried to kill

him. But he forgot his personal feelings as the significance of the burned-out farms struck a new, grim dread into him.

HE YELLED at the two saddle horses ahead of him and got them going at a gallop, then turned quartering across the Basin, heading for a jutting point of stone he could see along the distant rimrock. Tim Shane's sprawling log ranch house was over there near that jut of bluff, and Bill Dean's stomach felt cold and knotted as he raced towards the spot. He pulled the buckskin down to a running walk and laughed shakily in relief when he got close enough to see that the trees around the Shane place were not scarred snags.

"Tim didn't get burned out, anyhow," he said aloud.

But he received a jolt that set him stewing again when the two saddle horses he had taken away from Boozer and Lon came angling in to his left. They had not continued on down the Basin as he had supposed they would, but were heading for the Boxed S.

Bill was flabbergasted—had Tim Shane

To make slick, easy shaves a snap,
So toughest whiskers lose the scrap,
Use Thin Gillettes—save dough and time—
Four thrifty blades cost just a dime!

Made of easy-flexing steel
hard enough to cut glass



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

been responsible for that pair of coyotes?

He loped up towards the Boxed S buildings a few moments later, and suddenly his blood-smearred face was tight and a little pale as his eyes raked the place in startled glances. Five years ago this had been one of the best kept ranches he had ever seen. There had not been a weed anywhere. The barns, sheds and all other frame buildings had been neatly painted, and there hadn't been so much as a sag to any gate on the place. But now the buildings were scaly with peeling paint, roofs were ragged where storm winds had ripped shingles away, and the corrals, what of them Bill could see through the weeds, were broken and sagging.

Dazedly, he turned his attention to the rambling log ranch house. His legs were shaking as he swung down out of the saddle and stood there, staring at the weed-grown yard that had once been bright with Ma Shane's prized flowers. The window frames and doors had lost most of their paint, and the deep front porch was sagged in the middle, about ready to cave in.

"What the hell!" Bill breathed the words slowly as he stared.

He eased the Stetson a little on his throbbing head, and walked around towards the back of the house. He was lifting his hand to pound at the kitchen door when the portal swung open on hinges that moaned a ghostly note. A woman stood framed in the doorway, a slender woman with almost white hair. Her face was thin and pinched, and her shoulders sagged as if she were very tired.

"Ma!" Bill Dean's voice was little more than a choked whisper.

He tried to say more, but the words would not come just then. He was looking into eyes where grief has spread a dusky shroud over the dead sparkle and gaiety that had once been there. Bill thought Ma Shane did not remember him, and was groping for words to say, wanting to break through that wall of tired disinterest that seemed to cloak her. Then she moved, and a thin hand motioned to him as she stepped aside.

"Come in, Bill," she bade him.

Bill's feet felt as if they were granite blocks as he went up the steps and into the spacious kitchen. The trouble blight that had struck the Basin and left burned-out

farm homes in its wake had struck the Boxed S, and struck deeply.

BILL pulled off his hat as he went through the door, flinching a little as he saw that the blight had touched even the kitchen and what it held. The kitchen was clean—spotlessly clean, but it was dull with faded paint, mended curtains and a long unpolished range.

"I see you're in trouble again, Bill," Ma Shane said quietly, without emotion of any kind. "Is there a posse or anyone else behind you?"

Bill remembered his cut scalp and the blood that had matted his thick, black hair and dried in ugly streaks along his face. He tossed his Stetson down on the worn, faded oilcloth that covered a small table, then put his strong hands on the woman's thin shoulders.

"I'm not in trouble, Ma," he said gently. "I've been in no trouble of any kind since I left here. But you're in trouble—you and the whole Basin, from what I've seen. Tell me about it. What's happened here, and where are Tim and—and Edna?"

Bill tried to keep his voice steady, but he hadn't been able to do it. When he mentioned Edna's name, especially, his voice had been shaking.

Ma Shane looked up into his face, and for a fleeting instant some of the deadness left her eyes, and Bill saw her lips twitch as if she had almost smiled at him.

"You did remember her, didn't you?" she asked gently, and Bill thought she was about to cry.

"Tim's an outlaw, Bill," she said quietly.

"Tim's *what*?" Bill's voice was almost a yelp.

"It's the truth," Ma Shane told him wearily. "Tim's been on the dodge for three years. Sheriff Yank Potter has posted a thousand dollar reward for Tim's capture—dead-or-alive. They say Tim is the leader of the toughest, deadliest pack of buscaeros that ever roamed this border."

She broke off, and Bill saw tears come out of her eyes and spill down her wan cheeks. He wanted to say something, but his mind was too shocked to conjure up coherent words. He reached down and took her hands, shuddering a little at the lifeless coldness of the two thin fingers that suddenly clung to his.

"Edna is even worse off, I guess," Ma said steadily despite the fact that she was crying.

She pulled her hands free, brushed the tears from her cheeks. She sat down in a straight back kitchen chair, and Bill waited before her—speechless and tense.

"Edna sings in the Blue Moon, one of the toughest dives in Lost Creek," Ma told him. "She goes around with a man twice her age, and I hear they're to be married. His name's Ott Keiver, and he owns the Rocking K ranch down in the south part of the Basin."

She looked away from Bill's twitching face. "I guess you were gone a little too long, Bill," she said into the heavy silence that had fallen.

CHAPTER THREE

Horse Thief Sheriff

THERE was a three week's growth of blue-black beard on Bill Dean's lean face, and his gray eyes had a chilled, squinted look. He left his buckskin horse in a thicket at the edge of Lost Creek, and stood there for a few minutes, watching the wink of lights along the street. His clothes were brush-snagged, and the sweat-marked Stetson was pulled low over his eyes when he walked out towards the lights.

Bill had spent about three weeks combing the mountains around Mariposa Basin for old Tim Shane's sign. He had worked down into the badlands along and below the border, searching every known buscadero hangout for miles. But he had found no trace of Tim, or the tough bunch he was supposed to be bossing. Tim Shane was either dead and buried in some unmarked grave, or else he was holed up some place alone.

When he had visited her at the Boxed S three weeks ago, Bill had stayed with Ma Shane until he learned the full story of what had happened—a story of mysterious raiders suddenly appearing in the Basin, raiders who swarmed down on the prosperous little farms with blazing guns and torches that had set off haystacks and barns and houses. The raiders had yelled things like "This'll teach you sod-busters to crowd the Boxed S!", and, "The Boxed S knows how to handle range-ruinin' men!"

Two of the farmers had settled in Lost Creek and had sworn out warrants for Tim Shane's arrest. But when Sheriff Yank Potter and a couple of deputies rode out to get Tim Shane, the little cattleman was gone. He had, Ma told Bill, simply saddled up a horse and pulled out, telling her that he aimed to cut the sign of those raiders and either kill 'em where he found them or herd the murdering devils in to town.

Days had run into weeks, and the weeks into months, before Tim rode back to the ranch in the dead of the night. He had looked old and tired, Ma reported to Bill, and said he hadn't been able to discover a single clew as to the identity of the raiders. But Tim had heard about the warrant, and would not stay and face it the way Ma and Edna had wanted him to do. He rode out again, and after that they would see him maybe once a month when he would slip in during the night, stay for a few hours, then leave again.

"That went on for a couple of years," Ma had told Bill Dean. "Sheriff Potter had been coming out here at all sorts of hours, day or night, trying to catch him. Potter got tired of making the rides I guess, and ran off what few of our cowhands we had left. The sheriff sent Lon Burton and Boozer Zane out, claiming he didn't want me to stay here alone. But I think they're here to watch for Tim, and somehow Tim must have found out. He hasn't been on the place since Boozer and Lon came, and I've had no direct word from him."

Edna, Bill had learned from Ma Shane, had gone to work in the Blue Moon a year ago. Bill was mulling that over now as he walked out to Lost Creek's main street and sauntered along. Ma had seemed reluctant to talk about Edna's working in a dive, and Bill had been just as reluctant to ask questions. What Ma had said about Edna aiming to marry Ott Keiver had left a cold, dead weight inside him.

HE HAD scouted Keiver's Rocking K from boundary to boundary. Keiver had good stock, a fine ranch house, and a bunch of hawk-eyed hombres riding his range who looked as if they would know as much about handling six-shooters and Winchesters as they might know about catch ropes and branding irons.

Ott Keiver himself was a husky, big-shouldered man who wore expensive clothes that were not loud or gaudy, and rode some of the best horses Bill had ever seen. Keiver's flat-cheeked, wide-mouthed face was seamed and tough looking, and his dark hair was almost white at the temples. Bill had ridden out in the brush and let Keiver ride close to him several times, just for a chance to study the fellow. Keiver, Bill judged, was in his early forties at least—more than twice Edna's age.

The thought of Edna Shane marrying that tough looking hombre who was old enough to be her father had become a festering sore in Dean's mind. It gnawed at him constantly, and coupled with the worry over not being able to find old Tim Shane's sign, he was in an ugly mood as he stalked along the street.

He saw the Blue Moon ahead of him, blazing with light and swallowing a steady stream of booted and spurred men. Bill aimed to drift in there later on and hear Edna sing, and see what she was like now that she was grown up. It made him a little frightened to think about standing there and watching her and hearing her voice. Maybe, he decided, he would go up and say hello to her.

He had asked Ma to keep his presence a secret until he could prowl around and cut Tim's sign. He had wanted a free hand. But Tim Shane was not circulating in these parts, regardless of the stories that Ma had heard him leading a band of two-legged wolves on raids along both sides of the Arizona-Sonora line.

His mind was full of these thoughts as he shoved into the first cafe door he saw. He elbowed the grease-clogged screen door and started through. The door slapped hard, and Bill heard a profane roar as he tilted his head and stepped up into the threshold.

He did not go further, because his way was blocked by a rawboned man who stood on wide planted boots, squinting at him out of rust-flecked eyes that had an ugly slant. In fact, Bill decided, there was something ugly about the whole heavy-jawed, pock-marked face those slanted eyes were set in. Something ugly—and something familiar.

Bill's black brows took on a satanic slant as he looked down at the double, black-

butted guns pronging out from the rawboned fellow's muscular thighs. Then Bill's bearded lips split in a grin that held no mirth. There was a five pointed star half the size of his hand on the man's fancy leather vest. The word Sheriff was lettered in black across the star, and Bill knew that this would be the officer Ma Shane had called Yank Potter.

"Why the hell don't you watch where you're goin'?" the sheriff asked angrily.

Bill did not answer. He was watching Potter lift a long, bony hand, and tenderly feel a red welt that slanted down across the bridge of his hawkish nose. The screen door Bill had bunted open so hard had walloped the sheriff across that beak nose. Potter's eyes were misty with tears of pain, and his nose was beginning to bleed a little.

Bill saw all of that, yet it barely registered. He had placed this raw-boned man with the scarred face now, his mind reaching back to a night five years ago.

There had been eight men squatted around a camp fire down on the border the night he and his two harumscarum companions had decided to take a band of good Morgans away from professional horse thieves. The eight men about the camp fire had been the horse thieves. One of the eight had been this big fellow who now wore a sheriff's star and called himself Yank Potter.

BILL'S mirthless grin widened a little, and the feeling that had been riding him a few seconds before was gone. Maybe it didn't mean a lot. But to Bill's way of thinking, a horse thief wearing a sheriff's badge pinned to his shirt might be a good place to start looking for the answer to the lies about Tim Shane being a bandit, and his strange disappearance.

Bill muttered something he hoped would sound like an apology, turned on one heel, and stepped out the door. He slipped into a pool of black shadows that lay between the restaurant building and the building next to it, just as Yank Potter came out to the dirt walk. Potter was holding a wadded handkerchief to his nose, and Bill saw him crane his neck as he looked first one direction, then the other.

Potter had once been a horse thief, and probably still was. Since he had managed

to elevate himself to county sheriff, Potter would be playing with the really big-time outfits—probably hooked in with the notorious Horse Thief's Syndicate that operated all the way from this Mexican border country up to Canada. And a sheriff with that kind of skulduggery on his conscience would be the sort of badge polisher who hauled in and questioned every stranger who landed in his bailiwick.

"Potter would never have let me get outa his sight if that nose of his hadn't been hurtin' like hell," Bill ruminated. *"The thing for me to do, is fan the breeze out of town and get this thing straightened out in my mind."*

But instead of leaving Lost Creek as he knew he should, Bill walked into an alley and went towards the back of the Blue Moon. He wanted to see Edna Shane, and ask her what she meant by leaving her mother the way she had, and why she was singing in a place like the Blue Moon.

In three weeks he had been prowling around the badlands trying to find Tim Shane, Bill had done a lot of thinking about Edna. But he had come to one conclusion, at least, that offered a little comfort. If Edna Shane was working in the Blue Moon in the hope she might hear something about her father, then maybe she figured Ott Keiver knew something about Tim, and was just stringing that big cattleman along in the hope he would let his tongue slip sometime.

Bill had tried hard to believe that, yet he had failed to feel fully convinced. On the other hand, the idea persisted. He knew now that he had to see Edna quickly if at all, for he would have to keep away from town until he had had time to look into the affairs of this horse thief sheriff, Yank Potter.

He located the Blue Moon's door and was reaching towards it when the portal swung open, and a shadowy figure stood before him.

"Get away from here, you knot-head!" a peevish, creaky voice advised. "You ort to be 'shamed of yourself, tryin' to sneak back where the gals do their dressin'. If what the derned fools wear could be called dressin'," the voice added sourly.

Bill felt his face go hot under the heavy whiskers that covered it. There was a hallway inside the door, and a bracket lamp

on the wall gave light enough for Bill to see that the man confronting him was scrawny and white headed. The oldster had a double barreled shotgun tucked under one arm, and was bending forward, peering out at Bill near-sightedly.

"You deaf?" he shrilled. "I said git! Snoopin' around tryin' to—"

"Now hold on," Bill cut in sharply. "I'm not snoopin'. I came to see a certain lady, and I didn't aim to poke around where I wouldn't be supposed to."

"You've got the wrong place!" the old man snapped. "They ain't a lady among these painted hell-cats Pike Cotter hires to prance around in derned short skirts and keep fellers like you spendin' hard earned money across the bar and gamblin' layouts. If you young hombres today had any sense—"

"Quit yellin' your preachments and listen to me," Bill cut in. "I'm not huntin' any of the percentage gals. I want to see Edna Shane."

"Oh, that un," the old man grunted.

HE LEANED out a little further, peering intently. Bill kept his head down and edged back into the shadows.

"The Shane filly ain't like the rest, I'll admit," the old man muttered. "She's smoother. But she's not interested in ary bone-headed cowhand. She's got herself a bank roll hooked and—what the hell you doin'?"

The oldster's last words were a bleat of alarm. Bill had lunged at him, grabbing at the old man's arm, aiming to shake him loose from that scattergun and correct some of his vicious talk. But there were steps at the back door Bill had not seen in the darkness, and his charging feet struck them before he could grasp the old fellow's arm.

Bill fell to his knees, cursing through locked teeth when he saw the double barreled shotgun slant down at him. The old man cocked the weapon as he edged back a little from the threshold.

"Listen, you old goat!" Bill panted furiously. "You ever lay that poison tongue of yours on Edna Shane's character again, and I'll skin you."

He stood up, his hand on the six-shooter at his right thigh. The man above him spat, twitched the shotgun warningly.

"Kinda proddy, ain't you?" he asked.

"I'm proddy enough to wring your neck," Bill snorted. "Put that scattergun down, and behave yourself. I'm comin' in there, and you're goin' to show me where to find Edna Shane."

"You start in here, and you'll get a belly full o' shot!" the old man snapped. "On top of that, the Shane gal ain't come to work yet."

"All right, then tell me where she lives, and I'll see her before she comes to work," Bill retorted.

"Say, you're a stranger, by hellity-damn!" the oldster said shrilly.

"What makes you think I'm a stranger?" Bill countered.

"Anybody that lives around here knows where the Shane heifer hangs out," the old fellow answered venomously.

"Well, where does she stay?" Bill flung back hotly.

"At Ott Keiver's Rockin' K, you fool!" The reply shrilled in Bill's ears. "Soon as she's sung her last song around midnight, Keiver bundles her into his fancy-top buggy, and they light out for his place. She don't show up in town again until time to stark work, which is about now. If you think I'm joshin', hike around to the front, go inside. Ott Keiver and Edna Shane will be showin' up any time now."

CHAPTER FOUR

Foreman Wanted

THE sun was over an hour high when Bill walked out of the thicket where he had squatted since before dawn. He moved stiffly across a meadow, his eyes squinted and bloodshot as he watched the Boxed S ranch house. He had seen fat Boozer Zane and the scrawny Lon Burton ride away a half hour earlier.

Bill knew Ma would be there alone, since she had told him, when he visited her three weeks ago, that Boozer and Lon were the only two men the sheriff would let stay on the place. But Bill was taking no chances. With a horse thief behind the county sheriff's badge, cold-blooded killers like Zane and Burton being put on ranches where they were not welcome, it wasn't safe to take anything for granted.

Dean had his hand on his six-shooter, and there was a raw hell raging inside of

him that would spew forth in a split second if anyone crowded him. He wanted to keep his head, wanted to swallow the hurt that was eating the heart out of him, and keep plugging away here until he had found out about Tim Shane. And he meant to help Ma Shane, aimed to rid her place of Zane and Burton, and get the ranch in repair and running again.

Edna Shane, he told himself, was either a little fool, or else she had started playing a dangerous game in the hope she might find out something about her missing father, and had waded in over her head. And the rub was, he did not have the right to ask her which side of the fence she was on. He wished that he had written to her during those five years he had been away. She had been only a kid when he left, yet a mighty serious little copper-top. Bill reckoned that if he had written, told Edna that he was building a stake and would be back some day, her letters would have given him a reason to do what he could not do now—go after her and pull her out of the fire. But he had not written, and five years could make a lot of difference in a girl as young as Edna had been when he left Mariposa Basin.

He was walking past the end of the house, heading for the back door. His hand was still on his gun, and his slitted-eyes watched the bunk house door. Bill resolved to keep watch upon himself, for he did not intend to let Ma Shane know what he had found out about Edna. He vowed to keep that behind his teeth and bide his time. But when he had found Tim Shane, or found proof that Tim was dead, he would be able to go to Edna and talk straight. When he could do that, he would get her side of the story. And if Ott Keiver had used something he knew about old Tim as bait, to not only catch but hold Edna, then Bill reckoned grimly that he'd just naturally take his six-shooter and try his damndest to kill a two-legged skunk by the name of Ott Keiver.

"BILL!" Ma Shane's voice was shrill, and Bill jumped about a foot off the ground.

Ma was coming down the back steps, and Bill's heart knew another, yet different, ache when he saw the pathetic eagerness in her eyes. She caught hold of his arms, backing up the steps and into the kitchen

as he moved steadily forward, not wanting to stop until he was out of sight inside the house. He knew what her question would be long moments before it came, and fought to marshal his wits that he might give an answer that would at least not kill the hope in her eyes.

"Tim?" she asked breathlessly when he halted well inside the kitchen. "You found Tim, Bill?" she pressed when he held silent.

"No, Ma, I didn't find Tim," he told her gently. "Not a trace of him."

He saw her start to sway, saw her wan face turn even whiter. He caught her arm, steadied her.

"But that's good news, Ma, instead of bad," he said earnestly.

"Good?" she echoed faintly, and Bill led her to a chair when he felt her trembling.

He gently but firmly pressed her down until she was seated, looking up at him out of eyes that had gone tired and vacant.

"Of course it's good news that I didn't find any trace of Tim." He spoke rapidly now. "Don't you see, Ma?"

"No, Bill, I don't," she said tiredly.

"But think," he insisted. "If Tim was runnin' loose with a tough pack of owl-hooters, I'd know it now, for I've combed every inch of ground, both sides of the border. And there's no band of men usin' any of the hideouts or outlaw trails. Nor has any lone man been hangin' out around any of the places where outlaws camp when

they're in this neck of the woods. So whoever says Tim Shane is on the prowl, lies."

He saw interest kindle in her eyes, and was gratified by seeing the whiteness fade from her cheeks.

"Then where is Tim?" she asked steadily. "If he isn't dodging around the badlands alone or with other men, then he's—"

Bill saw where that trend of thought was leading, and headed it off. "I don't know for sure where Tim is," he said when her voice faltered. "But I've got a hunch or two."

"But why doesn't Tim get in touch with me?" Ma asked.

"With Boozer Zane and Lon Burton planted here to watch for just that?" Bill shrugged. "You know Tim would be too smart for that, Ma."

"Of course he would!" she said sharply. "And those two are here because Sheriff Potter put them here. Bill, if we could only get rid of those two, Tim might come home some night like he used to."

"We can get rid of Zane and Burton," Bill said grimly. "I watched until they rode off across the range, because I wanted to tell you what to do."

"I can't fire them, if that's what you want," Ma told him grimly. "I've ordered the good-for-nothing loafers off the place more times than I can count. They only laugh at me."

"All right, here's what we'll do," Bill said quickly. "I'll pull out of here soon, and then watch until they come back,

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which'll be around sundown, I reckon. Then if—"

"They'll be back in a couple of hours," Ma interrupted. "They ride out every morning about this time, and go straight to Rocky Canyon, back in the hills apiece. They're seldom gone more than a couple of hours."

"I remember Rocky Canyon," Bill said, frowning. "Tim and Edna and me rode up there one day, just before I left here. Five years is sorta long, but I think I remember a line shack in that canyon."

"It's an old stone shack a prospector built years ago," Ma corrected. "But what is it you want to do, Bill?"

"Oh, yes," he said, but there was a puzzled frown lumping his brows, and he stared blankly towards the far wall.

HE GAVE his head a shake, brought his attention back to his plan.

"All right, if that pair get back within a couple of hours, that saves me a long wait," he told Ma Shane. "I'll be watchin', and when they ride in I'll come along askin' who the boss is. You take a hand regardless of what them two say, and tell me you're bossin' the ranch. I'll ask for a job, and you hire me, then tell me you'll sign me on as foreman if I'll send them two down the trail."

"Bill, that's dangerous," Ma protested. "Those two are killers."

"I know that, and they'll not catch me nappin'," Bill promised grimly.

"I won't do it, Bill," Ma said. "You've no business running such a risk for the sake of others."

Bill was silent for several seconds, his eyes troubled as he glanced about the kitchen that had once been so gay.

"Think I've got every right to pitch in and do what I can, Ma," he said finally.

"Edna?" Ma asked gently.

"Edna," Bill nodded. "And you. And Tim. But there's more than that. You folks helped me—turned a crazy kid's steps off a trail that had nothin' but an early grave at the end of it. And helpin' me, unless I miss a guess, is why you and those farmers have had the grief you've had."

He looked at her, a challenge in his eyes, as he finished. He had expected shock, instant protest. But Bill himself was the one who got a shock. Ma Shane's eyes were

dim with tears as she looked at him and nodded.

"Yes, Bill, you've found it out, I see," she said unsteadily. "Tim and Edna and me all swore neither of us would ever let you know that helpin' you started the trouble here. Who told you?"

Bill's heart was hammering against his ribs, and his throat felt like a piece of flannel. "Then my hunch was right," he groaned. "I did fetch the lightnin' down on you people."

"Hunch?" Ma echoed, and now there was a surprise in her eyes. "Oh, my heavens!" she said unhappily. "Bill, I've talked out of turn, as Tim would say. I thought you'd heard something definite. If I'd known you were only guessing—"

She broke off, her lips trembling as she watched his bearded face.

"It wasn't just guessin' on my part," he told her steadily. "Durin' the three weeks I've been prowlin' these badlands, I've done a lot of thinkin'. And it didn't take much brain work to see that trouble started here soon after I left. But what I can't see is any reason for that bunch of horse thieves to jump you people here in Mariposa Basin. They'd want to hang my hide on the fence, sure. But why take it out on you and Tim and Edna and the farmers?"

"The money, Bill," Ma said quietly.

"Money?" Bill Dean asked blankly. "What money?"

Ma's eyes sharpened, and suddenly she was on her feet, her hands clutching Bill's strong arms as she looked up into his puzzled eyes.

"Bill, didn't you and those other two boys get seventy thousand dollars the night you tackled those horse thieves down by the border?" she asked, speaking slowly, putting a little emphasis on each word.

BILL felt his legs shake under him, and felt as if someone had him by the throat, shutting off his breath.

"Seventy thousand dollars?" he said blankly.

Then the truth hit him like a white hot stab of fire searing his tired brain.

"Ma, you've thought ever since I left here five years ago that I had that money," he said hoarsely. "And when I rode back three weeks ago, and said I had a stake, you thought I'd come sneakin' back, aimin' to

spend seventy thousand dollars that had cost you and Edna and Tim and those farmers years of hell and fear and worry."

"Yes, Bill," Ma admitted. "I did think all you've said. But it isn't true? You didn't kill that fellow the horse thieves called Mort Keppler and get the money he had in his saddle bags?"

"Me and them other two crazy kids never heard the name of any one of the horse thieves," Bill told her gravely. "And none of us got as much as a red penny, much less seventy thousand dollars. All we got that night was a flock of bullets whistlin' around our ears. We rode down on the thieves, shootin' at the sky and yellin' at the top of our voices.

"The horse thieves took to the brush, and us three young fools stampeded a band of fine Morgans the thieves had. But we didn't get far. Them horse thieves came out of the brush and they came out shootin'. And they were on fast, fresh horses, to boot. We saw that we'd overmatched ourselves, and ducked into a side canyon. The horse thieves tore on after the Morgans, thinkin' us fools was still drivin' the band, of course."

He broke off, wiped away beads of cold sweat that had come to his forehead. He scowled, concentrating hard to remember the exact happenings on that night five years past.

"Me and the other two boys were scared green," he went on. "When the horse thieves hammered past our hidin' place, we jumped our horses out into the trail, aimin' to hike out of there in a hurry. But we showed ourselves too soon. One horse thief had lagged behind. There was a good moon up, and I saw him in time to yell at my two partners. We spurred back into the side canyon, but this thief had seen us, and he come after us on the run. We kept out of his sight in the brush for maybe half a mile, but he was crowdin' us hard, followin' us by sound."

"He was the one who shot you?" Ma prompted when he fell moodily silent.

Bill nodded. "The brush gave out in the canyon, and we had to take to an open slope. The gent followin' us opened up, and one of his slugs hit me in the right leg, almost knocked me out of the saddle. The horse thief was a big, bulky lookin' hombre, but he sure could ride.

"My partners kept goin' after I was hit, and that big feller got to crowdin' in on me for a kill. I was sick and scared, but I drug out my gun and fired back at him. I seen him sway, and I seen him throw his gun away and grab the saddlehorn in both hands. Then his horse went to buckin' on that steep slope, and the latigo strap broke, for the big gent went sailin' into a manzanita clump, saddle and all. I kept goin', Ma, and I don't know to this day whether that cuss was hurt bad or not."

"He was hurt badly, Bill," Ma said slowly. "In fact, he was killed. That man you shot to save your own life was the Mort Keppler these horse thieves have mentioned. He crawled back to the camp where you and those other two boys had jumped the thieves. But Keppler fas too far gone to talk when his companions returned. He died before dawn, and those horse thieves believe that you took Keppler's saddle after shooting him. But if what you say is true, then that money—"

SHE broke off, her eyes probing Bill's. "That seventy thousand dollars is probably still in Keppler's saddle," Bill said steadily. "And Keppler's saddle is down yonder close to the border, somewhere on a tall slope that has patches of manzanita here and there. But how do you know what the horse thieves think about the deal, and that they found their pal, Keppler, dyin'?"

"Those horse thieves came here many times, Bill," Ma sighed. "They always came at night, wearing masks and long slickers, regardless of the weather. Sometimes there were only two, sometimes there were three. They would call Tim and me outside, then stay in the shadows and question us for hours on end."

"They think Tim got hold of that money, or some of it, anyhow?"

"They found those two boys the day after you three made that raid," Ma told him gravely. "The boys convinced the horse thieves that they knew nothing about any money, and were promptly murdered by the raging thieves."

"You and Tim ever get a look at any one of the horse thieves or recognize any of their voices?" Bill asked after a grave silence.

"They always came in the dark of the moon, or before moon rise, or when there

were clouds," Ma said. "Tim and I could see only their faint outlines. They were invariably squatting on their heels, so that even their figures were impossible to see clearly. They talked in a muffled manner and Tim said they held something in their mouths, probably pebbles."

"Then you've got no idea who any of the thieves are?" Bill probed.

Ma Shane's eyes clouded, and for a moment she bit her lips, frowning a little.

"All right, Ma," Bill said gently. "You know somethin', or at least you've got a suspicion. But you don't want to talk, for fear I'll kick up a ruckus. That right?"

"That's right, Bill," Ma nodded. "Heaven knows there's been enough trouble. I don't want you getting into more danger than you're probably already in."

"The trouble with your good intentions, lady, is that I've already picked up a lead on my own," Bill grinned dryly. "I happen to know that the sheriff you call Yank Potter is one of them horse thieves."

"Bill, are you sure?" Ma cried.

"I'm not guessin', Ma," Bill told her gravely. "Yank Potter is one of them. I saw him the night Charlie Goss and Joe Lake and me raided that horse thief camp. I saw Potter again last night, and recognized the squinch-eyed son of Satan. And I'm layin' a bet with you right now, that Boozer Zane and Lon Burton are two more of the horse thieves."

"I didn't know about the sheriff," Ma admitted uneasily. "But I've suspected all along that Boozer and Lon were two of the thieves. Their impudence, their open contempt for me, started me wondering about them. Then their voices sounded vaguely familiar the very first time I ever heard them."

"There'll be more than three men in that outfit," Bill said evenly. "But, likely enough, Potter, Zane and Burton are the big-wigs—the bosses."

"Bill, don't do anything foolish," Ma begged. "Go to the Arizona Rangers. They'll help you handle Yank Potter and these other two."

"I don't aim to make a foolish move if I can help it," Bill said grimly. "But I can't go to the Rangers."

"Why can't you go to the Rangers?" Ma wanted to know.

"In the first place, I've got nothin' that

would stand up in court against Yank Potter and these other two," Bill pointed out. "In the second place, any move like that would tip my hand, and I've got to work this fast and smooth. I've got a hunch, Ma, that Tim is bein' held captive. It's only a hunch, but it's the best answer I can think of to Tim's disappearance. Capturin' him and holdin' him some place where they could work on him would be the way of cold-blooded killers like Potter and these other two snakes. I've got to find Tim before—Here comes Boozer and Lon!"

BILL'S voice was sharp on the last few words. He had glanced out the kitchen window, and saw the two riders loping in towards the corrals. They were close, and Bill's eyes took on a wicked glint as he watched them.

"All right, Ma," he said thinly. "I'll duck out the front door, watch until them two are at the corral, then come around here to the back again. They'll come runnin' when they spot me. You hire me, and let me handle it from there on. I've just got another hunch that's about to blow my head apart. I can't explain now, but if I'm right, Tim will eat supper with us here tonight. No, don't go nervous on me now, Ma. Just sit tight, play the cards the way I said, and wish me luck."

Bill was gone before Ma could recover from her surprise. He went through the big house on the run, but eased out the front door without slamming it. He peered cautiously around the corner of the house a few moments later. Boozer and Lon were out at the corral, unsaddling their mounts.

Dean pulled his hat on and stepped clear of the house. There was raw hell in his eyes as he watched Boozer and Lon. They had seen him now, and were coming out of the corral, fast.

Bill angled on towards the back door, giving no sign that he had seen the two men rushing towards him. He rapped the back door with hard knuckles, pulled his hat off when Ma appeared. Boozer and Lon were close behind him now, cat-footing along, unaware that Bill knew they were closing in on him.

"Good mornin', lady," Bill greeted Ma as if she were a total stranger. "I was ridin' past, and thought maybe this ranch might be needin' a hand. Is the boss around?"

"Right here, Mister!" Boozer Zane said sharply.

Dean turned, stepping aside so that Ma Shane could come through the door. She did, and Dean moved off the step into the yard, so that she would be in the clear if things went wrong.

"I was just askin' your Missus if you needed another hand," Bill said to Boozer Zane. "I can handle horses, or I'll make a hand on the range. The name's McCord—Bill McCord."

"Don't call that fat lout *my* husband!" Ma Shane said with considerable fire. "But if it's a job you're wanting, Bill McCord, I'll hire you."

"Don't pay no attention to the woman, McCord," Boozer said impudently. "I'll do any hirin' that's done here."

Boozer said harshly. "Git back inside and keep out of this."

"Lady, I'm signin' on as your foreman, takin' the job as offered, and thankin' you kindly," Bill said soberly.

HE BOWED to Ma, put his hat on, and turned so that he was fully facing Boozer and Lon.

"Git, you whiskery saddle tramp!" Lon ordered thinly.

"That's good advice, friend," Boozer said softly. "The old woman, there, is a little crazy in the head. We humor her best we can. But sometimes—"

"Good-bye, you two vinegaroons!" Bill interrupted.

His voice was smooth, almost gentle. His bearded lips twitched, split in a grin that

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Boozer and Lon were staring at Bill Dean. He knew from their expressions that they realized they had seen him and heard his voice before. But they had not recognized him yet, thanks to the heavy beard that covered his lean face.

"We ain't hirin' nobody right now," scrawny Lon Burton piped up suddenly and peered intently at Bill.

"Seems like a lot of authority around here," Bill said dryly. "But I still want a job, and the lady says I can have one."

"Mister McCord, ain't we met before?" Lon Burton asked coldly, and his hand was edging towards the butt of his six-shooter as he stared.

"You've got a job, Bill McCord," Ma Shane said before Bill could answer Lon. "The pay's forty a month for good men, plus keep. But I'll make it a hundred a month and your keep and make you foreman if you'll chase these two crooks off the place and see that they stay off."

She waved a contemptuous hand at Boozer and Lon, who were edging apart and fondling gun butts.

"Watch your tongue, old woman!"

held no hint of mirth. Boozer and Lon blinked at him, and his grin widened.

"You're leavin'?" Boozer asked uncertainly.

"No," Bill said dryly, "I'm not leavin'. But you two are. Go peaceable, and I won't take your clothes, this time."

"Boozer, it's that buzzard we tangled with up on the rimrock a while back!" Lon bleated. "The one with all that money we almost—"

Lon got no further. He and Boozer were startled by the sudden recognition of Bill, and were exchanging glances even as their hands pulled guns from leather. But their momentary boggling was what Bill Dean had counted on when he let them know who he was. He leaped with all the pent-up savagery that was boiling inside him, his six-shooter out and swinging in a short arc that brought it violently against Lon Burton's head.

At the same instant, Bill's left arm went out stiffly, his bony knuckles popping against Zane's jaw. Boozer had his gun out and was thumbing back the hammer, but the blow from Bill's fist rocked him off balance

and he held his fire, cursing frenziedly as he tried to bring the gun around. But Bill's gun was swinging again, and the barrel of it thumped Boozer's balding head solidly. Boozer sighed, buckled at the knees, and blasted a bullet into the dirt as he fell.

Dean was breathing hard, but the mirthless grin was still on his lips when Ma Shane ran down the steps to him. Bill holstered his gun, disarmed the two senseless men, working so fast Ma had no chance to say anything.

"Got any padlocks around?" he asked when he had the guns of the two fallen men.

"A box of new ones," Ma told him. "Tim intended to lock every gate on the place, fearing those horse thieves would take our remuda. I'll get the locks. But what do you intend doing with them?"

"There's generally plenty of chain around a ranch," Bill said evenly. "You get those padlocks, Ma, and I'll show you how to chain up a couple of two-legged coyotes so's they'll behave."

He hurried over to the little blacksmith shop, began rummaging around swiftly. When he returned to the back yard a few moments later he was dragging two long, thick chains. Ma Shane was there, and wordlessly handed him a heavy little box. Bill knelt beside Boozer and Lon, working hurriedly.

A few moments later he stood up, looked down at the two men. Around the neck of each he had loped an end of chain, then snapped a quick, strong padlock through the links. The chain collars around the necks of the two men were not tight, yet Boozer and Lon could not slip their heads from the chains.

Bill looked around, saw the foot-thick bole of a tamarack tree that shaded the back yard, and dragged Burton over to the mat of soft needles beneath the tree. He went back, got Zane by the feet, and snaked him across the yard to the deep shade of the tamarack. He looped the free end of each chain about the tree bole, locked the chains in place with two more padlocks. Then he stood up, moved out into the hard sunlight.

"Get inside, Ma," he advised. "Take the three guns, yonder on the steps, that I got off them two whelps. Lock the doors and don't pay any attention to them hollerin'

when they wake up. And you might fix a kind of special supper if you feel like it. Tim Shane will be home tonight."

He was moving then, his long legs working so fast he seemed to be running as he headed for the thicket where his buckskin horse was hidden.

CHAPTER FIVE

Unsuccessful Mission

THERE was a six-shooter in Dean's hand as he crawled through the thick brush along the little stream in Rocky Canyon. Sweat trickled down into his eyes. The heat was oppressive here in the narrow, high-walled gorge. But despite the heat Bill shivered, for up ahead of him was the old stone shack he remembered seeing the day he and Edna Shane and her father had ridden through this canyon.

There was neither sight nor sound to suggest the presence of other human beings. Yet Bill sensed that other humans were there, or had been recently. He could smell the fragrant odor of wood smoke, although there was no sign of smoke coming from the rusty stove pipe that stuck up above the shack's roof. But the windows were gray and dull looking because blankets had been hung over them on the inside, and Bill kept shivering and cussing as he made his tedious way to the last fringe of brush that would shelter him.

He lay there for long moments, studying the little clearing. There was a freshly worn trail running across the clearing to the cabin door. Bill knew that he should circle the place, see if there was a guard posted anywhere at the back. But that meant a trying half hour at best, and he wanted to get this over with as fast as possible.

That Tim Shane was in that shack he did not doubt for a moment. The instant Ma had said that Boozer and Lon pulled out from the ranch and came here to Rocky Canyon every morning, Bill had known where to look for old Tim. Ma had said that Boozer and Lon would be gone for a couple of hours each day, and Bill knew that that would just about give them time to come and cook a bait of grub for Tim, give him fresh water, then maybe heckle the old fellow for a while.

Sheriff Potter getting rid of Tim Shane's

cowpunchers and putting his own two murdering partners out there had been another give-away move. Tim's ranch had gone to seed, and his cattle were probably scattered from hell to Haw River. But that wouldn't bother men like Potter, Zane and Burton. All they were interested in was getting Tim to tell them where to find money he knew nothing about. It had been a dirty, cold-blooded game, and Tim would probably be in bad shape.

Bill lay there thinking. He was playing a lone hand, and had to be cautious. If he failed now, Tim Shane would never leave that shack alive. Sooner or later, Yank Potter would tire of this sweating and murdering Tim. After that, Ma Shane and Edna—Bill's brain seemed to writhe as Edna's name crossed it. The bitterness he had known since the night before flamed up in him anew, and suddenly he was on his feet.

He crossed the clearing at a crouched run, the slap of his boots and the jingle of his spurs loud in the eerie silence. Then he was before the cabin, his eyes drawn to the huge padlock on the door as he skidded to a halt. He lowered the hammer on the six-shooter, shoved it into the holster at his thigh and opened his lips to call Shane's name. The name never passed Bill's lips. He heard the raspy sound of a boot-sole on gravel, the sharp intake of a startled man's breath.

BILL whirled, and the world became a red, searing inferno through which he plunged as if his muscles acted against his will. There at the corner of the cabin was Ott Keiver, his burly, well clad figure in a half crouch, his flat-cheeked face twisted into a black scowl as he tried to flip the barrel of a rifle up to aim.

Bill hit man and rifle head-on, and knew that he was carrying Keiver over backwards, and that the rifle had exploded. But Bill found the rifle and wrenched it free, tossing it far aside.

He was on his feet none too soon, for Ott Keiver was coming at him with a speed that few men his size could have mustered. Keiver's massive arms were cocked wide, and he came in at a slithering run, reaching, ready to seize his much slimmer opponent in a crushing bear hug.

Mad as he was, Bill knew better than to

get inside those powerful arms. His bearded lips grinned wickedly, and his gleaming eyes carefully measured the distance. He looped a left to Keiver's broad chin, threw a right hook that should have found Keiver's jaw. But the right hook only grazed Keiver's head, knocking the Stetson from his thick hair.

Bill jumped back, realizing that the left he had sent in first had not lifted Keiver's head as it should have. He chopped twice at the broad, angry face with savage blows, but Keiver came straight on, got those arms around him, and tripped him with a thick leg. But Dean twisted like a cat, yanked his knees up, and shoved them hard into Keiver's belly as they struck the ground.

"You dirty, double-crossin' son of a snake," he raged. "Mary Edna, would you? Bring her father out here to beat and starve and finally kill him for information he ain't got. And all the while honeyin' up to Edna, turnin' her head with lies. Get up, Keiver. You ain't worth a bullet, you damned horse thief. I'm killin' you with my bare hands."

Keiver got up, a look of blank amazement on his big face. He spat out dirt and blood, bored Bill with his hard, rust-flecked eyes. "Who are you?" he asked in a strangely calm voice. "And what's all this nonsense about—"

Bill wasn't listening. He tore into the larger man, and he came in fast, his fists pumping. Keiver staggered, groaning a little. His nose was streaming blood, his face was a red mask from knuckle-ripped skin, and his left eye was swelling badly. Bill was still dancing around him, punishing him with those lashing fists. But Keiver landed a few punches, and Bill's nose was bleeding, and there was a bloody gash under his right eye that was beginning to puff up.

"I've changed my mind, Keiver," he panted. "I can't kill you, because that'd hurt Edna. Laugh if you feel up to it. But I love that copper-topped little lady. So I can't kill you like I ought to, because Edna would hate me. But I'll beat you into the ground, Keiver, then get that crooked sheriff pal of yours.

"I've got the other two. They'll talk, and you'll go to hell with a hang-noose around your neck if you ain't out of the country. Come on, you old goat. Wade right in and—"

Dean's voice ended there. His boot heel sank into a soft spot of earth, and he was thrown sharply backwards, his arms windmilling as he tried to catch his balance. Ott Keiver hit him like a charging bull, his powerful arms closing like a huge vise.

"Listen to me, you crazy young fool!" Keiver roared. "There's a mistake—"

Bill Dean didn't hear any more. They crashed to the stony earth, and Bill's brain seemed to explode inside his skull. He was vaguely aware of pain across the back of his head, then blackness came down as if night had suddenly fallen.

BILL struggled feebly, feeling the ache in his head become a fierce and punishing pain. He tensed his muscles, intending to heave and twist and fight Ott Keiver's crushing grip. But there were no arms trying to cave his ribs in, no hot breath against his neck, no bloody, gloating face above his. He blinked dazedly up at the sky, then turned his throbbing head. He was still in the little clearing, and before him the earth was trampled and bloody and torn.

Bill sat up, groaning as the pain in his head worsened. He lifted a shaky hand, found that his hair was matted with drying blood across the base of his skull. Then he saw the cabin door, and forgot his misery.

He was on his feet, advancing on the cabin at a stumbling run. But he was too late. He stood in the doorway, looking at the bunk, the table with tin dishes still on it, and the stove where two pots and a skillet held food. The place had been lived in for a long time, and the chain fastened into the stone wall by heavy bolts told Bill Dean who had lived here.

"Tim!" he groaned. "They had him chained here, and I let Keiver get him away."

Bill whirled, went back into the clearing. He found his six-shooter and Stetson, but had to rip the sweatband out of the hat before he could bear it on his throbbing head. Then he was going down the canyon at a stumbling run. He was sick and knew that his legs were threatening to buckle under him. But he kept going, driving himself on until he reached the boulders where he had hidden his horse.

He crawled up into the saddle and turned the buckskin around, sending it down the

canyon at a run. Bill was winded from running and blind from pain, yet he rode out of Rocky Canyon and across the flats as hard as the horse could carry him. He roared into the Boxed S yard and knew that he was again too late. Boozer and Lon were gone from beneath the tree.

Bill quit the saddle and staggered into the house, calling Ma Shane's name. There was no answer. Ma Shane was gone.

"Keiver rode here with Tim, let Zane and Burton loose," he said through stiff lips. "Then the three of them took Ma and Tim on somewhere, maybe to a new hideout."

He raced back to his horse, went into the saddle at a flying leap. He had taken note of the sun's position as he raced out of Rocky Canyon, and calculated that he had lain there unconscious for a couple of hours, perhaps longer. In falling after Keiver clinched with him, his head had struck a stone. He still felt giddy, and there was a weakness in his muscles that he had never known before. He hoped that the black dizzy spells which came over him now and then would not knock him out of the saddle.

He set his teeth against the pain in his head and tried to read sign along the trail that led towards town. But the sandy roadway was a jumble of hoof marks that meant nothing. He remembered that it was a long ride to town, and pulled the buckskin in to a pace that the horse could keep without getting too hot. But each stride of his horse was like a hot blade ramming into his brain, and he was almost blind from pain and beginning to sway in the saddle when he topped a tall ridge and felt the horse flinch under him.

BILL heard the thin whining sound, but not until the boom of the gun that had thrown the bullet came up to him did he realize what was happening. Then there were other thin whining sounds, and his sluggish brain finally understood that those sounds were bullets, and that they were coming dangerously close to him. His vision was strangely fuzzy, but he could see the riders down the slope maybe a couple of hundred yards. They were jumping their horses around behind a bunch of brush.

He dismounted, his muscles lax and weak. He staggered off the trail, leading the buckskin into the shelter of an up-slanted boulder. He leaned his head against the

saddle for a moment and rested that way, listening to the shouting of the men below, and the shrill scream of the bullets ricocheting from the boulder that protected him and his horse. He lifted the rifle from the boot on his saddle and walked slowly back out into the trail. He realized vaguely that this was the wrong thing, that there was no cover here. But he was tired, and making those flabby muscles move him on to the rocks yonder across the open ground was too much of an effort.

A bullet struck his left leg and he sat down hard. It did not hurt, and he looked down at the two holes the slug had made through his pants leg, one front, the other in the back. The wound was half way between his knee and thigh, but he could move the leg. The bullet had missed the bone, and Bill looked down the trail, surprised that the three men were still on their horses. Other bullets were kicking the dirt around him, but he was not interested in that.

He felt better now that he was on solid ground instead of astride a loping horse. He thought of Ma and Tim Shane, and of Edna, and kept his eyes on the men down at the brush clump. His vision was clearing, and his hand did not shake when he held it out, watching the fingertips.

A bullet hit his hat, cocked it over sideways on his head at a strange angle. But Bill scarcely noticed. He had recognized those three men down below him. They were Sheriff Potter, Zane and Burton.

"Keiver will show up, too," Bill said calmly.

He raised the rifle, began sighting. A bullet bit hard at his left shoulder, spun him sidewise, caused him to drop the rifle. He looked down at the cocked Winchester,

moved his injured shoulder, and realized that he could never lift and sight the gun. He heard wild whoops, the sudden pound of hoofs. They were charging him!

CHAPTER SIX

Graves for Gun-Slicks

SHERIFF Potter and Zane were in the lead, riding neck and neck. They held their fire, sure of themselves, closing in for the kill. Bill watched them calmly, knowing that soon their guns would begin spurting red death.

Bill knew that something was wrong with his head—knew that falling on that stone back in Rocky Canyon had done more than just cut his scalp. Death was boiling up the trail towards him, drawing dangerously close. Yet he was unexcited, a little sleepy, totally unimpressed.

He pulled the six-shooter out of his holster, considering carefully. There were only five cartridges in the cylinder, since one chamber was left empty under the hammer. Hitting three riders out of five shots would take some doing, yet Bill knew that it had to be that way. With his left arm numb and useless at his side, he could never reload with any amount of speed.

He winced a little when he saw Potter and Boozer stowing their rifles, pulling six-shooters. Bill sighed, flipped his gun up, and let the thunder of his first shot roll out across the hills. Potter and Zane crouched, but came straight on, shooting now. Behind them, Burton was rearing up in the saddle, his arms windmilling. He went off over his mount's rump, and the horse came on, crowding between Potter's

Scratch your head*
and if you find...

You've got dandruff
on your mind...



GET **WILDROOT**
CREAM-OIL

GROOMS THE HAIR — RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF

*THE FAMOUS
FINGER- NAIL
(F-N) TEST



horse and Boozer Zane's. That rattled Zane and Potter. They began cursing as they quit firing and looked at the riderless horse.

Bill did not know why, but he wanted to be on his feet. He pushed himself up, moving cautiously against the pain in his head and thigh and shoulder. His left leg would not stand much weight, but it was not broken, and he planted his boots far apart, his head thrust forward a little as he threw his second shot.

Boozer reared straight up in the saddle, and Bill could see his mouth spring open, and could hear the eerie wail that came from those writhing lips. Then Boozer was falling off into the dirt, and Bill brought his smoking gun around, feeling the first tensing of nerves he had known.

Potter was a scant rod away, his lathered horse hurtling straight at Bill. Dean fired, but too fast for accuracy. He saw Potter duck violently, but that was all he had time for. The sheriff's horse shouldered him, and he felt himself sailing through the air as if he had been thrown a mile.

HE SAT up the moment he stopped rolling, spat out dust, and blinked his eyes to clear them. A bullet made a hissing sound through his hatless hair and he saw that Potter had turned, was roaring back towards him. Potter held bridle reins in bared teeth, and his pock-marked face was a mask of viciousness and hatred as he thumbed both six-shooters into roaring life.

Bill slanted his own gun up. From the tail of his eye he saw other riders coming up the slope now. Or perhaps he heard their yelling, and spotted them a second later. At any rate they were coming, and Bill flicked one single glance at the close-packed group of horsemen. In the lead was Ott Keiver, on a magnificent white stallion Bill had seen him ride before.

Bill sighed, and let the gun in his hand roar as he brought his eyes back to the sheriff's face. Potter swayed, and his hat flew off in the breeze. But Bill did not find out whether his shot had done any damage or not. Potter's horse was upon him, beginning to arch up at the last second as the animal tried to avoid striking him with grinding hoofs. But the beast's up-sweeping knees struck him in the face, sent him crashing and rolling along the slope.

For a time it seemed to Bill that there was a lot of shouting and stamping and noise around him. But he could not open his eyes, and presently the sounds subsided, and he felt himself slipping off into a cool, black void where everything was decidedly pleasant. He kept trying to tell himself that he had one cartridge left in his gun, and that he had to get his head, and his gun-hand, up out of the dirt.

Keiver and a group of riders were coming along the slope. He didn't care about the men with Keiver. But he had one cartridge left, and Ott Keiver was a big target. If he could cripple Keiver with that last bullet, maybe he could bluff him into saying what he and his horse thieves had done with Ma and Tim Shane.

Bill became a little angry when he thought about Edna, and lit into cussing because he could not use that last bullet to kill Keiver instead of just trying to cripple him. But Edna was in love with Keiver, and killing that blasted son of Satan would only get him into a peck of trouble with the girl.

Girls, he ruminated bitterly, must be as crazy as most people claimed they were. Anyway Edna Shane must be a little crazy for not seeing through a snake like Ott Keiver. Bill reckoned aloud that Edna would come to her senses when the country got an honest lawman on the job and Keiver was tossed into jail and hanged for his crimes. What burned him up was the fact that he could not use that last bullet to save the county a lot of expense. The more he thought about it the madder it made him, and he started telling himself that he had to get up, get the dirt raked out of his eyes, and spend that last cartridge in his gun.

HE DID not believe what he discovered when he opened his eyes. He had no gun in his hand, no pain ran like fire through his body, and he was not out on a hot, sun-baked slope, with horsemen roaring at him behind thundering guns. He was in a room—a very large room with rich rugs on the floor, curtains at the window. And there was a lady sitting in a chair beside his bed, holding one of his hands and talking to him in a low, crooning voice. She was a little thing, and Bill saw tears in her blue eyes as he looked at him. Her hair was so golden that at first you did not see the

threads of silver, and her face had the exquisite look of a fine cameo.

"Please rest, Bill," she was crooning. "Don't worry. Everything is all right. There is no fight, no more reason to worry. Just relax, rest until—"

"Excuse me, mam, but where am I?" Bill blurted the words.

The woman gasped, looked at him steadily for a second, then laughed shakily. "Oh, thank God!" she whispered, and before Bill realized what was happening she bent over, kissed him lightly on the forehead.

He was so amazed he could only stare at her when she sprang to her feet, went sweeping across the room like a drifting shadow. She went through a door, and Bill let out a breath he had been holding for a long time.

He lifted a hand to his face, felt the familiar stubble of whiskers. His head, he soon learned, was tightly bandaged. There were other tight bandages on his leg and shoulder.

He turned his attention to the room, wondering where his clothes were, and whose house this was. But his wondering stopped abruptly, for the door across the room had opened again, and there was a vision sailing across the space towards him that brought his heart into his mouth and left it there. He saw tear-wet green eyes, a wealth of flame-copper curls, and a piquant little face with a small, stubby nose.

"Edna!" he heard his voice pronounce her name as she reached the bedside. Then she was kneeling, her slim white arms gathering him as tenderly as if he were a baby.

"Bill, oh, Bill!" she said softly, and brought her lips to his.

Now there were other people coming into the room, and Bill wished the lump would leave his throat so he could laugh and shout—and cuss.

Ma and Tim Shane came through the door together, Ma helping Tim along because he limped some on his right leg. Bill wanted to shout to them, wanted to match their happy smiles, laugh with them as his one good arm held Edna hungrily closer to him. Then Ott Keiver and the lovely lady who had been at Bill's bedside when he awoke followed Ma and Tim into the room, and Bill wanted to cuss at sight of Keiver. But Keiver was beaming, and he had one arm around the golden-haired lady.

Bill looked up at Ma and old Tim, who were hovering close and smiling down at him.

"It's good to see you, Mister!" he grinned at Tim. "I done a lot of prowlin' before I located you. Then a two-legged—"

He broke off, glowering at Keiver, who laughed heartily.

"You'd crawl out of that bed and fight me right here in my own house, wouldn't you, Bill?" Keiver boomed. "Well, young fellow, you calm down. To begin with, I've spent months hunting Tim Shane, convinced, as you evidently were, that he was a captive, being held by Yank Potter and those other blackguards. I had just stumbled onto that shack in Rocky Canyon, and was moving up to investigate when you jumped me."

HE BROKE off, his eyes twinkling as he looked down at Bill and Edna. "As for the copper-top, there, I think she can set you straight about our engagement," he went on. "This is my wife, Bill."

"Wife!" Bill Dean echoed a little weakly, his eyes wide as he stared at the pretty, golden-haired woman standing next to Ott Keiver.

"Of course I'm a hussy, according to the things you've said these five days you've lain here unconscious, darling," Edna said softly. "But Uncle Ott and Aunt Nora took me in because Ma was in danger. You see, Bill, those horse thieves who were holding Dad prisoner sent me a note, telling me to get away from home and stay away, or something would happen to Ma."

"The note went a lot further than that, son," Tim said gravely. "Edna was instructed to get a job in some dance hall, refuse to explain to anyone, and make no trips home or communicate with her mother in any way. She was warned that her mother would be killed if she disobeyed orders even once."

"But why?" Bill croaked. "Why did the devils want Edna in a dive instead of at home with her mother?"

"It was all part of their dirty scheme to break me and Ma, make us talk," Tim said grimly. "They wouldn't believe we didn't know where that seventy thousand dollars is hid. They would have killed us before much longer."

"But it's all over now," Ma Shane said

happily. "Tim's leg is sore from having been in chains so long, but that will heal. You'll be well soon, son. You had a concussion from falling against the stone in Rocky Canyon. But you're out of danger now."

"How about Yank Potter?" Bill asked slowly. "I dropped the other two, I know. But the last I recall, I shot at Yank Potter and knocked his hat off."

"Your bullet hit him under the chin and traveled all the way up through his head before it knocked that hat off, lad," Ott Keiver said gravely. "After I left you in Rocky Canyon I got Tim out of that leg iron and rode like blazes to his place. Mrs. Shane was in the house, safe. But Potter had ridden out to the Shane place to see how his two hirelings were getting along. He found them chained to the tree, and cut them loose with a hack-saw. The three of them were about to storm the house and take Mrs. Shane when they saw me coming. They left, and I got the Shanes into town as quickly as possible. I gathered a posse and tried to catch those three devils there in town. But they got wind of what was happening and pulled out."

"So that's why they didn't quit their saddles and fight from behind brush and rocks when they met me," Bill nodded. "They knew a posse was on their heels. But there's one thing I still don't savvy, Keiver."

"Since you already have a wife, and a mighty beautiful one, too, how did you keep the whole country thinkin' you and Edna were engaged?"

"Nora, my wife, has been in bed most of the time since we came here, over a year ago," Keiver told Bill. "I was a construction engineer back east. But when Nora got sick, I wound up my business and got her here as fast as possible."

"Nora hasn't been out, and it was her own idea that Edna and I pretended to be engaged. Edna was in grave danger every minute, Bill. But when I started squiring her around, that put a problem up to Potter

and his bunch. My cowboys are no bunch of gentle Annies, and Potter didn't want any extra trouble on his hands. So he had to let Edna alone."

"I've been a bone-headed fool," Bill groaned. "I thought—I mean—"

"We'll just leave you wallowing in your misery, and give you a chance to square yourself with Edna," Keiver grinned. "You did a lot of talking while you were out of your head. You talked about letters that should have been written, a dirty old son-and so who was trying to steal your girl, and about a nose that maybe did grow up to fit a certain face, after all."

"All right, Mr. Keiver," Bill grinned. "I reckon I've got my work cut out for me. But before you folks go, there's one more thing. In case you don't already know the addresses of the farmers who were burned out of Mariposa Basin, try to find out where they are."

"Why, Bill?" Edna asked before any of the others could speak.

"Because I aim to pay those people for the loss they had," he said quietly. "Down yonder on the border, I know where to find a canyon with long slopes, and manzanita clumps along the slopes. In one manzanita clump there'll be a weathered old saddle, with seventy thousand dollars that Potter and his bunch have hunted so long. I'll get that money as soon as I'm able to ride, and it's my vote that it be split up between the people who were burned out by the horse thieves."

"Edna, that cowboy is as wonderful as you've always said he was!" Mrs. Keiver declared as she and the others left the sick-room.

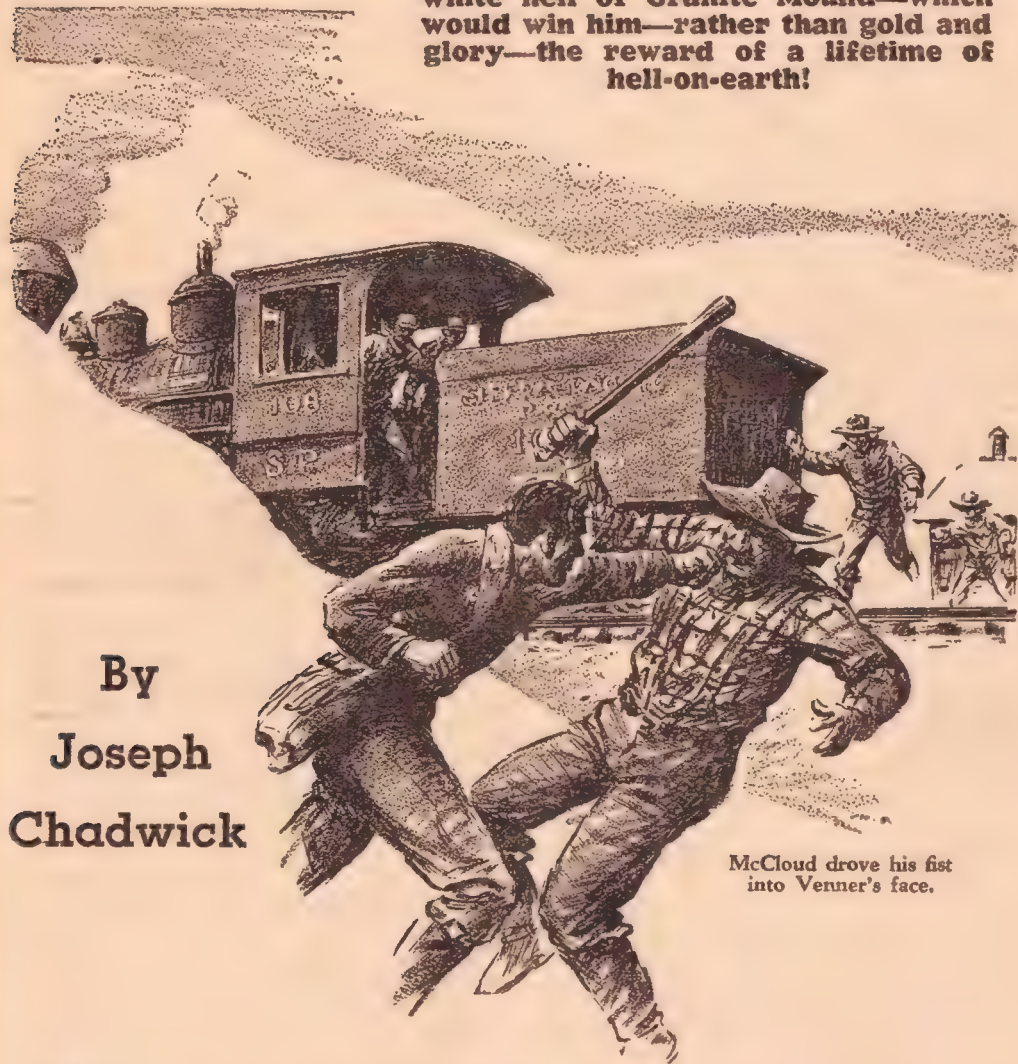
When the door was closed, and they were alone, Bill looked into Edna's radiant face and started wondering where to begin and what to say. But he quickly discovered that there was a better medium than spoken words to use in telling her that he had a stake that would start them out with a good little ranch of their own.

THE END



RAWHIDE BOSS OF THE STEEL TRAIL

This was one time that McCloud wasn't going to follow the axiom: "In engineering, find the simplest way!" . . . Instead, he must push the steel farther into the white hell of Granite Mound—which would win him—rather than gold and glory—the reward of a lifetime of hell-on-earth!



By
Joseph
Chadwick

McCloud drove his fist
into Verner's face.

THE rail head was stalled in the high reaches of the snowbound Sierras, and McCloud, his temper grown short, cursed a Nature that played havoc with a man's technical skill. "Open your throttles, you fools," he shouted. "Open 'em up!"

But he knew it was no use. An engineer

can move a mountain, or tunnel through it, but this piled-up white hell was another matter. The snow plow was pushed by three funnel-stacked locomotives in tandem, but it could not break through those giant drifts. The engines puffed out smoke and steam; their wheels spun, but they did not move. McCloud's Chinese labor stood

by helplessly and shivered in their padded cotton. McCloud swore, and wondered if he should not pray instead.

"We're licked, O'Reilly," he said to his construction boss. "It's got me stumped."

"Come Spring," O'Reilly ventured, "and the thaw—"

"By then, the road will be bankrupt."

"It's as bad as that?"

"Yeah—it's as bad as that," said McCloud. His breath steamed on the frigid air. There was a chill in his bones. He added, "Keep things moving. I'm on my way to High Junction, and I don't know when I'll get back."

O'Reilly showed surprise. "High Junction? What for, boss?"

"To meet the company's bigwigs," McCloud answered, scowling. "I'm on the carpet!" He turned away, but muttered over his shoulder, "And afterwards, maybe, I'll try getting drunk!"

High Junction was a sorry cluster of frame shacks that had mushroomed up on the right-of-way. McCloud rode in on a work engine, and he swung down from the cab before the locomotive came to a stop. Seeing that the train which was to bring the company officials from Sacramento had not yet arrived, he plodded through the knee-deep snow to the dingy but optimistic Round-Trip Saloon.

A couple of loafers seated around the pot-bellied stove looked up. "Howdy, Mr. McCloud."

He merely grunted in reply and, making for the bar, said to the bartender, "Whiskey—a full bottle."

The bartender set out a bottle and glass, and said, "You hear the talk, Mr. McCloud? Folks are saying the railroad won't ever push through the mountains."

"Folks should mind their own business," he replied carrying his whiskey to a corner table. He was in an ugly mood. Pouring a drink, he realized that more than liquor he needed a chance to think. There must be a way to break through that mountain snow, he told himself. Mark Gunthrie, the eccentric genius who had planned the road, would have found a way. Too bad Gunthrie had died. . . . *"In engineering, find the simplest way."* The axiom had been Gunthrie's creed. But Mark Gunthrie, McCloud thought bitterly, hadn't lived to fight Sierra snow.

THE clanging of an engine bell roused McCloud from his dark mood. Through the frosted saloon window, he saw the Sacramento train pulling in. The engine was hauling a string of flats loaded with steel rails, rails from the New England mills. They had been shipped by boat to Panama, unloaded there and freighted across the Isthmus, then loaded onto another ship for passage to California. It was a long, senseless haul, and in it McCloud recognized the vast need for a transcontinental railroad. At the end of the string of flat cars was a gaudy red coach, the special car of the Sierra Pacific's officials.

Staring at that fancy coach, McCloud's lips curled in a bitter smile. The three men who owned the road lived and traveled in luxurious ease, while the real builders of the line froze and suffered—and died—out in the hills. McCloud saw a man wrapped in muffler and overcoat come from the private car and make for the saloon. McCloud did not move. Let the bigwigs come to him. . . .

The saloon door swung open, and the man from the train called out, in an arrogant voice, "McCloud here?"

"Here," said McCloud.

It was dim in the barroom. The newcomer's vision had difficulty seeing after the sunglare on snow outside, and it took him a moment to locate the man he sought. He came frowning across the room, a big and handsome man—with the unmistakable air of thinking himself head and shoulders above other men. McCloud half rose from his chair, staring. He felt a pounding rage in his veins. His memory reached back half a dozen years; and now, with Stage Munson halting before him, it was as though the past was but yesterday. Munson's eyes showed surprise.

"So you're McCloud?"

"That's right," flatly. "I'm McCloud."

"That wasn't your name six years ago."

McCloud sank back in his chair, reached for and swallowed the drink he had poured and not touched. Six years had it been? He had hated this man that long. Hard-eyed, he watched Munson sit down opposite him. The man's had recovered from his surprise. He had his wits about him, as always, and he was as unmoved by surprise as a professional faro dealer.

"Your name was Jeff Allen, then!"

"Meaning what, Munson?"

"Meaning that I have a good memory—and that the Law might have, too." Munson's voice was pitched low, so that he could not be overheard by the loafers and the bartenders. He grinned crookedly, poured a drink of McCloud's whiskey. "Your health, *Mister McCloud*," he mocked.

McCloud's temper flared. "I'm not asking why you're here, Munson," he muttered. "I don't care, so long as you keep out of my way. I'm building a railroad, and I'll break the man who bucks me. That's a warning, Munson. Heed it!"

"Take it easy, McCloud," Munson said. "I came here to offer McCloud a deal, and since you're McCloud—so much the better." Completely at ease, Munson lighted a cheroot. "I'm the new superintendent of the Sierra Pacific. An Eastern banking syndicate has bought into the company, and I'm here to protect—and to further—their interests.

"McCloud," said Stace Munson, "my crowd *doesn't* want the Sierra Pacific pushed through the mountains this winter."

McCloud stared, a bewildered expression covered his face.

"If the road stalls this winter, it'll be forced into bankruptcy before Spring," Munson went on, still whispering every word. "Then my crowd will take over—lock, stock and barrel. I cash in, McCloud, and you won't be the loser—if you play the game my way."

McCloud reached out, grabbed Munson, and poised his right hand for a crushing blow.

"You dirty blackleg—"

"Hold on, McCloud. You're in no position to refuse my offer. A telegram East would bring the Law. A murder is still a murder, even after six years. It would mean prison, McCloud—and a hangman's noose."

He pulled away from McCloud's grasp, and rose. "Think it over," he said. He dropped his cheroot, ground it under his boot heel. "You'd better come along. The temporary officials of the Sierra Pacific are waiting to see their engineer, named McCloud. . . ."

Laughing at his own jest, he turned and left the saloon.

THE trans-continental railroad had been the dream of the late Mark Gunthrie. Three San Francisco merchants had backed the scheme, almost against their considered judgment. They were men of small stature, mentally, wholly lacking in Gunthrie's foresight, and now they were dwarfed by the sprawling enterprise. They were actually three petty men, troubled and afraid.

They had hoped for a quick profit; they no longer believed there was a pot of gold at the end of Gunthrie's rainbow. Holt, Benson, Andrews; they sat in the warm parlor compartment of their special coach, giving McCloud sullen attention. And McCloud, pacing the carpeted floor as he talked, damned himself in their eyes.

"We're stalled in the snow, I tell you," McCloud said savagely. "Sure; I've bridged rivers and tunneled through mountains—but now I'm up against snow drifted thirty feet deep—for miles! We can't keep the roadbed cleared long enough to grade and lay track!"

"Gunthrie said it was an all-weather route," said Andrews; he was a wizened man, and he belonged behind a shop counter. "Ah, Gunthrie—there *was* a man."

McCloud halted his pacing, glared at the three. "I'm not Gunthrie, and I never claimed to be. Since you're not satisfied, do you want to replace me?"

"It might be a good idea," Andrews said, while Holt and Benson sagely nodded. "Munson, do you know a good engineer to take McCloud's job?"

Stace Munson had been silent all this while, frowning while he listened. It was apparent that he did not want McCloud fired, now that he felt that he had the engineer under his thumb. Stepping forward, he said, "McCloud is the best choice you gentlemen could have made. Gunthrie was a genius, and McCloud was his pupil. If any man can push rails through the Sierras, it's McCloud. I suggest we give him another month—" He paused, looking at each of the trio.

Andrews said grudgingly, "All right—a month, but no longer!"

Holt and Benson whispered together, and finally Benson said, "A month. But in thirty days, the railhead must be beyond Granite Mound—or McCloud goes." He looked up at the towering engineer, a small man puffed up with his own importance.

"That's all, McCloud. Push the tracks beyond Granite Mound!"

McCLOUD grunted. He turned away without a word of farewell, as much disgusted with the three officials as he was with Stace Munson. He dropped from the coach to the deep snow, started for the work engine that would take him back to the construction camp. But Munson followed, and he called out, "McCloud, one minute."

Munson grinned broadly and slapped McCloud on the shoulder. "Good acting, partner," he said. "You sure fooled those stuffed shirts. The devil himself couldn't have scared them more."

Munson went on talking, ridiculing Holt, Benson and Andrews. McCloud let him talk—permitted him to believe he had lied to the officials. He eyed the man narrowly, wondering why it was some men used their talents in the wrong way. Without that crooked streak in his nature, Stace Munson would certainly be a success in honest endeavor. Suddenly, McCloud was aware again of what Munson was saying.

"I've a man in your camp, McCloud—a man named Dutch Venner."

"Yeah; a powderman. He showed up last week."

"He'll work with you," Munson went on. "He's got his orders. He'll slow up work with all sorts of 'accidents'. Between the two of you, the Sierra Pacific should stay stalled until hell freezes over."

Flat-voiced, McCloud said, "I'll talk to Venner."

He started to turn away, but then he halted—stopped dead in his tracks. Munson and he had left the coach at the rear; they had been in but one compartment of the car. Now a girl had descended from the coach's other end, and she was coming toward McCloud. She was a tall girl in a fur coat. She had blonde hair, and her face was cameo-perfect. She was laughing as she stumbled through the deep snow. But then, seeing McCloud—recognizing him—her laughter died away. She stared in amazement.

"Jeff—Jeff Allen," she whispered.

Memories flooded McCloud's mind. This girl was Munson's sister; she was the one person in the world with whom Munson was strictly honest—except that she was

kept in the dark regarding his blackleg schemes. McCloud had known Helen Munson well; there had been a time when he had believed that she would be his wife. That had been six years ago. A man named Carter had been murdered; he had been the heavy winner in a poker game that had taken place in Jeff Allen's hotel room. . . . He had been murdered with Jeff Allen's pistol, a derringer bearing its owner's initials. The motive had been robbery, of course, and the murder had been committed by Stace Munson—but only Jeff knew, but could not prove, that. Allen had had to flee, and take the name McCloud. . . . Now he faced Helen again.

"Jeff," the girl whispered, "Jeff, is it really you?"

"I'm sorry, but you've made a mistake. My name is McCloud."

"Jeff! Don't talk like that!"

"I'm sorry," he said again, stonily.

She gazed unhappily at him, her hands half lifted. "I never believed—" she began, but McCloud had stepped past her.

McCloud was hurrying to escape, running and stumbling through the snow. He did not look back. He climbed to the cab of the work engine, and shouted to the engineman to get under way.

BACK at the railhead, McCloud threw the construction camp into a feverish activity. He would beat the Sierra snow; he would defy Stace Munson. Mark Gunthrie had always said, "*Find the simplest way!*" The simplest way to beat the snow was to tunnel through the giant drifts. McCloud called his construction bosses into the box car he used as his office and quarters. He told them what he wanted. They shook their heads, thinking he was mad. O'Reilly, who was his friend, protested.

"You can't do it, boss," O'Reilly said. "Tunnel through snow, sure. But those tunnels will cave in—we'll lose men, and equipment. It won't be like boring through rock, where it's solid."

"We'll shore it up," McCloud said. "We'll cut timbers in the hills, and we'll brace the drifts like they do mine tunnels. It's our only chance. We've got only a month to clear Granite Mound!"

McCloud had a genius of his own. Once he saw a way clear, he could drive himself

and his men and accomplish almost miraculous results. The stoic Orientals swarmed through the vast drifts, shoveling, hauling, building, bracing. A framework was built for every foot of snow tunnel, and the Sierra Pacific crawled ahead. A blizzard struck, but it did not hamper or undo the work; the construction went on inside the tunnels.

Graders, track-layers and bosses worked with a new zest. McCloud was everywhere, coaxing, cursing, praising. He was racing time, fighting to pass the black bulk of Granite Mound within his allotted thirty days. Stace Munson was forgotten. And Helen? There were nights when she came to him in dreams.

It was at the end of the second week when a section of tunnel collapsed. McCloud was at the cook tent, when a locomotive's whistle started a steady howling—the signal of disaster. McCloud ran from the tent. He saw at once what had happened. An engine had been shoving a flat car of rails through the tunnels, and it had been caught under countless tons of snow when the wooden supports gave way. McCloud shouted for diggers—he grabbed a shovel, himself.

It took the remainder of the day and most of the night to clear the right-of-way, even though hundreds of men worked feverishly. The engineman was dead when they reached him, the fireman was badly injured. The heart went out of McCloud. He surveyed the wreckage with despairing eyes. If one tunnel had caved in, there was a possibility that the other would. He called to O'Reilly, and said, "Stop the work. We can't risk any more lives." He started to turn away, but O'Reilly called to him, "Boss, come here!" The Irishman's voice was excited.

McCloud climbed over the snow and the rubble of the wreck. O'Reilly had cleared some of the tunnel's upright supports. He pointed to one heavy timber that was broken in two. "See that?" he said.

"It was cut halfway through," McCloud said.

"Yeah; by an axe!"

McCloud understood, then. Enough timbers had been cut part way, so that the movement of an engine would, by causing a strain, make them collapse. McCloud remembered his talk with Stace Munson.

He said, "Dutch Venner." He had forgotten about the powderman in the excitement of building the snow tunnels.

"I saw Venner prowling the tunnels an hour before this happened," O'Reilly said, and swore. "He had an axe. If I had guessed—"

McCloud said, "I'll handle Venner." He was already turning away.

DUTCH VENNER was coming from the cook shack, after a meal, when McCloud found him. Venner was a big man, big chested and big in manner; he had the mark of the hard-case about him. He halted before McCloud, a smug grin on his thick lips. "So your loco idea didn't work, eh, McCloud?"

McCloud said, "You're pretty handy with an axe, Venner."

Venner's guilty start gave him away, but in a half-hearted bluff he said, "What are you getting at, McCloud?"

"You killed a man, Venner."

"The hell you say!"

"You, and your boss, Stace Munson."

Venner looked about frantically, as though seeking a way to escape. He made a sudden leap, grabbing up a pick handle that lay in the snow. He swung it like a club, aiming at McCloud's head. But McCloud stepped in fast, dodging the blow. McCloud drove his fist into Venner's face. Venner fell backwards, dropping the club; but he got his legs under him and levered himself up. Lunging forward, he wrapped his arms around McCloud in a bear hug. They toppled, rolled in the snow, and now Venner tried a strangling hold on McCloud's throat.

McCloud's wind was cut off by that clamping throat hold; his chest began to ache, and he felt a hammer-like pounding in his head. Panic gripped him. He heaved his big body upward and managed to throw Venner from atop him. Venner cursed and grabbed at him again, but McCloud got clear and rose to his feet. The hardcase flung himself up, but McCloud caught him with a solid blow to the chin. Venner's head rocked back; he grunted with pain and gave ground. McCloud followed him up, battering his face—he hit Venner again and again, until the hardcase sagged down and sprawled out unconscious.

McCloud stood swaying like a drunk,

beaten, too—and knowing it. O'Reilly came up beside him. "He ought to hang, boss," O'Reilly muttered.

McCloud shook his head. "He is only the hired hand in this dirty game. The man actually to blame for what happened is safe in Sacramento." He turned away, moving unsteadily. "Run Venner out of camp, O'Reilly," he said. "And tell him I'll take a gun to hunt him down, if he comes back!"

GRANITE MOUND! A great rock formation, rearing up a thousand and stretching out for nearly ten miles. The route laid out by Mark Gunthrie skirted the Mound's base; the track would be laid so close to the sheer granite cliffs that a man would be able to lean from a railroad coach and, by stretching, touch rock with his finger tips.

Vast quantities of snow and ice lay in the deep crevices cut into the sheer rock slopes, threatening always to tumble downward in crushing slides. Granite Mound frowned awesomely down upon the construction camp—upon the puny humans toiling in the snow-filled canyon. McCloud feared the Mound, as he feared a treacherous human enemy, but he pushed the railhead along—trespassing upon Granite Mound.

He built his snow tunnels. He shoved the track ahead foot by foot, yard by yard—and a mile gained seemed a gigantic achievement. But Granite Mound was ten miles long, and McCloud had but a week left. A week? It could be done, bar accident. McCloud kept telling himself that: "*It could be done!*"

He was at the eastern end of Granite Mound, making a survey, the day Stacy Munson arrived at the camp. O'Reilly sent word by a rider, and McCloud, knowing this would be a showdown, left his transit and his crew. He mounted his horse and rode back to the camp, making it as darkness closed down.

O'Reilly met him and took his horse, and McCloud saw the lighted windows of Munsin's private coach just beyond the edge of the camp.

O'Reilly said, "This Munson claims he's the new superintendent of the Sierra Pacific. He brought that sidewinder, Dutch Venner, with him."

"Venner, eh?" said McCloud.

"Yeah," said O'Reilly. "And a girl. She was up at the cook tent an hour ago, trying to pump me—about you, boss. Says she knew you back East, a long time ago." The construction foreman's Irish face hardened. "I don't know what's up, Jeff, but if you want me to side you—"

McCloud answered softly, "I'll handle this myself."

He went to the engineering car, which stood on a temporary siding. It was an ordinary box car, but it had been fitted with windows and a hinged door, and a set of portable steps to the door. The window panes were frozen over, but McCloud saw that a light burned within the car. He supposed that O'Reilly had been there to build a fire against his return, but when he entered he found that someone other than O'Reilly had lighted the oil lamp.

Helen Munson sat in the car's one chair, close to the warmth of the pot-bellied stove. She had removed her hat, and her wealth of blonde hair was golden in the pale lamplight. She looked up anxiously, with a wavering smile, and she said, in a whisper no louder than a sigh, "*Jeff!*"

McCloud was stunned, and he stared unable to talk. He had the ugly suspicion that she was playing her brother's game, that she had come here to win him over to Stace Munson's blackleg game. For Munson knew how he, McCloud, felt about Helen. Then McCloud, still staring, wondering if it might not be something else, for he could not believe, in his heart, that this lovely creature would have any part of a crooked scheme. He wondered if Munson had not brought Helen because she would act as a damper upon his. McCloud's, desire to fight.

Finally, he found voice, "You wanted?"

"Jeff, you make it so hard," the girl said. She rose and, as before, she lifted her hands to him. "I've forgotten pride," she went on. "I'm humbling myself—Jeff, I want to know why you went away without me. There was an understanding between us. You cared—I know you did! Did you think I would turn from you, because you were in trouble? Was it that, Jeff?"

"I fled from arrest," he said, as though that explained all.

"I would have fled with you," Helen

said. "But you wouldn't have needed to flee, at all. The police learned later that you could not have killed Carter. There was a witness, Jeff, who saw you far from the scene of the crime—at the very moment of the murder."

McCloud's mind reeled. Six years of hiding, of fearing discovery—needlessly. And Stace Munson, less than a month ago, threatening him with the law. Stace Munson, the actual murderer!

McCloud said, "Does Stace know you are here?"

"No, Jeff. He told me to keep away from you," Helen said. "But I came without his consent. I am of age, and I have my own life to live."

"Helen, stay here," McCloud said, taking a gunbelt from a wall peg. He saw the bright look of hope in her eyes. "Stay here until I come back," he told her, and left the box car.

IT WAS nearly half a mile along the tracks to Munson's private coach. There was snow falling again, stinging his face, but for once he did not curse it. He could lick the Sierra snows; it was Munson he now had to whip! The holstered .45 slapped against his thigh, and was a comforting weight. He reached the coach, thrust open the door and stepped into the warm and luxurious parlor compartment. Stace Munson sat at a table writing, and he was alone.

"Munson, where is Dutch Venner?"

Munson looked up, frowning. "Never mind Venner, McCloud. I want to talk about—you." He rose and came from behind the table, a heavy look of anger on his face. "You've bucked me, McCloud. You've pushed the road halfway along Granite Mound. You fool! Can't you see there

are millions to be made, millions to be lost? You're through, McCloud—as of now. I'm bringing out an engineer who'll play the game my way!"

"You'll stall the road, force the company into bankruptcy," McCloud said. "Holt and Benson and Andrews will be squeezed out of the company. And a lot of little investors, people who risked their savings to buy Sierra Pacific stock, will lose their money." He shook his head. "It won't be like that, Munson. . . ." He laid a hand on his gun. "You carry a hide-out gun, blackleg—draw it!"

Before Munson could move or reply, the night quiet was shattered by an explosion. There was one terrific blast that shook the windows of the private coach. Then there was a great rumbling—the ominous rumbling of a snowslide—of ice and snow crashing down from Granite Mound. McCloud knew at once. He knew by the way Munson listened, with no show of concern. "Venner!" McCloud shouted.

He turned and leapt toward the door. Munson laughed, and mocked, "Too late, McCloud. You can't stop it. That slide will smash your camp! Your road is stalled—for good, McCloud!"

"You fool!" McCloud yelled. "Helen is at the camp!"

He did not stop to see how Munson reacted to that. He plunged from the coach, dropped to the snow, ran wildly. The snowslide filled the night with a sound like thunder. The railhead was being blotted out under countless tons of snow and ice. Men were crying out. An engine whistle, its lanyard tied down, was shrieking. The rumbling beat against McCloud's ear—against his brain. He plunged on until stopped by the hurtling snow and ice.



**TOPS FOR
QUALITY**



To make it worse, a howling blizzard struck that night. But despite the frigid gale and swirling sleet and snow, rescue work went on. Most of the laborers had escaped; they had fled from their tents at the first rumble of the snowslide. Some however—perhaps a score of Chinese—had been trapped. A few of these were dug out, injured but still alive. McCloud, working in a frenzy, dug down to the engineering coach—a shovel in hands, a prayer on his lips.

Others helped him; O'Reilly and the other foremen, along with some trainmen and the coolies, shoveled the snow away from the coach. Stace Munson was there, too, using a shovel for perhaps the first time in his life. Munson worked like a wild man, and he cursed the others when they rested. . . . They broke through to the car's roof. An axe was brought, and McCloud wielded it—cutting through the wooden roof.

He called down through the opening, called the girl's name. There was no answer. McCloud let himself down through the opening, and he found Helen a crumpled heap on the floor. A lantern was let down, and in flickering light McCloud found that the girl lived. . . . "Drop me a line," he called.

He had to get her out of the car, to the private coach. . . .

MCCLOUD and Munson carried the unconscious girl to the car on a stretcher. They placed her in the bed of her compartment. Munson was haggard; his handsome face was blue from the cold, and his teeth kept chattering. He said, "She'll live, McCloud?"

"She's got to have medical care," McCloud said.

He left the coach and told the train crew to get up steam for a fast run to Sacramento. He called to O'Reilly, "Get the other injured aboard—no matter what Munson says."

He prowled through the dense white curtain, circling the coach, knowing that Venner was somewhere out in the storm—watching for a chance to board the outgoing train unseen. The injured were placed aboard. The train got under way, and a figure came running to the train.

McCloud drew his gun. He called, "Venner—you, Venner!"

The figure kept on running, trying to jump onto the rear platform of the running coach. McCloud ran forward, coming in front of the man. A gun in Venner's hand spurted flame, and McCloud felt the slug tear through the folds of his heavy coat. He fired at Venner, and missed. He stumbled, and he fell. Venner fired again, but too high. Then Stace Munson's voice sounded from the platform of the receding coach: "Dutch—get him! Get him—else he'll have us hang!"

Venner fired again, and McCloud, still lying in the snow, triggered out a shot with careful aim. Venner fell. . . . Another gun blasted—Munson's gun—but it was instantly silenced. O'Reilly had shot Munson, shot him from the coach's platform into the piled-up snow.

McCloud rose, and said, "He should have been mine, O'Reilly."

"I did the job for you," O'Reilly said. "Because of the girl."

"She'll know, anyway."

"She'll only know that he died in the snowslide," O'Reilly said.

Spring came and the thaw carried away McCloud's fantastic snow tunnels. But the Sierra Pacific pushed ahead into the mining country of Old Washoe, and had no more need for such makeshift engineering. The Chinese coolies hacked the road out of the rock hills.

"A good job done, eh, boss?" O'Reilly asked.

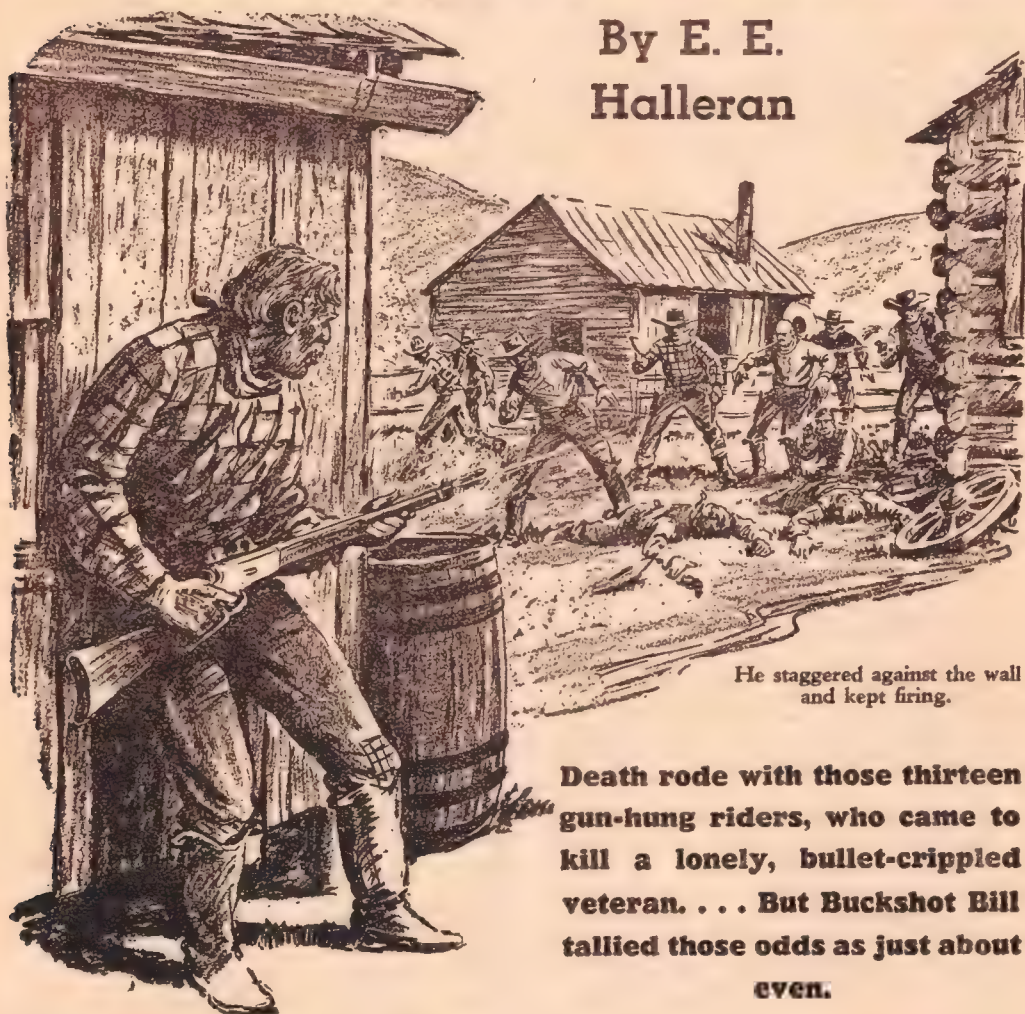
But McCloud looked ahead and, seeing the rough country of Nevada and the barren desert of Utah, could only answer, "It's only half done, partner."

He had no doubts but that the job would be done, despite an unwilling Nature and the ugly machinations of men—of other men like the dead Stace Munson. At times, McCloud would stop looking ahead and would gaze back along the gleaming rails. He would wonder how soon a train would come bringing Helen Munson to the railroad. She would not grieve forever, back there in Sacramento. Certain of that, McCloud would face about again.

"All right, O'Reilly," McCloud would say. "Tell those boys to step lively. We'll push her ahead another mile. . .!"

PURGATORY POSSE

By E. E.
Halleran



He staggered against the wall
and kept firing.

**Death rode with those thirteen
gun-hung riders, who came to
kill a lonely, bullet-crippled
veteran. . . . But Buckshot Bill
tallied those odds as just about
even.**

THE APRIL sunshine was cheery and warm but there was neither warmth nor cheer in the eyes of the men who came up the trail. There were thirteen of them, all heavily armed and grim faced. At their head rode a stocky man of middle age, a tight-lipped hombre who might have been pleasant if there had not been so much tragedy in his face. A shiny new badge glinted on his vest but none of his followers bore any such sign of official connection.

At the door of the sawmill two men watched apprehensively. Dr. Blazer, owner of the mill, shifted his cigar. "I don't

like the looks of it, Major," he murmured. "There's some of the worst gunmen in Lincoln County in that crowd. I wonder what they want?"

Major Godfrey, the Mescalero Apache Indian Agent, rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "No telling," he growled. "In this bloody business anything can happen."

Dr. Blazer pushed aside his doubts and stepped forward to greet Constable Dick Brewer and his men. They were affable enough but evasive, announcing merely that they formed a posse whose errand was to "wait for a man."

Blazer did not argue, a decision which

would have seemed eminently proper to any other intelligent citizen of Lincoln County. No one bucked the men who rode with Constable Brewer. All of them were notorious gun fighters and at least two of the group were to achieve fame as real bad men. Singly they were dangerous; banded together they formed a menace no sane man could ignore.

O'Folliard, French, McNab, Bowdre and Waite were names which made other men wary, but in this company they were overshadowed by their companions. Their reputations were local, whereas there was already a national notoriety attached to the persons of Hendry Brown and his companion William Bonney, also known as Billy Antrim or Billy the Kid.

PROBABLY no more deadly outfit ever banded together for any purpose. The best guns of the Southwest were gathered here under the leadership of a man who had plenty of bitterness in his heart. A crowd like this might have upset a government or dispersed a regiment. Lesser men have done it. Instead their names are in the records because they were beaten and out-gamed by a cripple—who was mortally wounded at the very beginning of the unequal battle.

The cripple's name was Andrew Roberts. He seems to have played no important part in the riotous events which made Lincoln County an offense to civilized minds but he was to take a real place in the bloody records because he refused to be beaten by thirteen of the county's hardest cases.

In his earlier years he had been an army sergeant and a Texas Ranger, perhaps also a deserter and a fugitive from justice. He was commonly known as Buckshot Bill because his acquaintances—he had no friends—asserted that if he were to be upended a pint of buckshot would fall out of him. To be strictly accurate, the lead content of his stumpy body was in somewhat larger chunks, some of it absorbed in a couple of bloody Indian fights and the rest of it acquired at odd times from other assorted gentlemen. Most of it seemed to cause him no discomfort but a couple of his wounds had crippled his arms so that he could not raise either hand to shoulder height.

Ignoring the handicap he moved to Lin-

coln County, New Mexico, just in time to find himself in the center of the holocaust known as the Lincoln County war. He took up a little ranch in the Ruidosa Valley, declaring himself no party to the struggle which was already beginning.

The Lincoln County war broke out in deadly earnest after many months of feuding between the Murphy and McSween factions. The spark being provided by the brutal murder of an English rancher named Tunstall.

Sheriff Brady was a Murphy man so McSween immediately took steps to give himself a similar sign of legal backing. He persuaded Justice of the Peace Wilson to make a deputy constable of Dick Brewer, Tunstall's foreman. Thereafter it was Murphy and the sheriff against McSween and the constable. Both sides thus claimed to be fighting the battle of law and order against the lawless opposition.

NOW THEY came to Blazer's Mill, stalking a cripple. The posse went into Blazer's house for dinner and while they were eating they received notice that an armed man was coming across the shallows of the Tularosa. It was Buckshot Billy Roberts, ragged and inoffensive looking as he bestrode his dejected bay mule.

There was a hurried council of war and Frank Coe, a neighbor of Buckshot Bill, went out to meet the ragged man. He met him at the corral where Buckshot was leaving his mule. Buckshot shifted his Winchester clumsily to his crooked left arm and shook hands with Coe.

"Better come in with me and surrender, Buckshot," Coe told him. "Brewer's got thirteen men and you won't have a chance of puttin' up any scrap."

"Not while there's a load in my gun!" Roberts retorted. "I know what happened to Morton and Baker when they surrendered."

He walked toward the house with Coe, however, keeping his rifle poised. None of the posse appeared until the two men were close to the Agency building. Then Bowdre took the lead away from Brewer and stepped out into the open. "Get 'em up, Buckshot!" he snapped.

Bowdre was only fifteen feet away but Roberts brought his rifle to his hip, the only position from which he could fire it,

since his crippled arms would not permit him to raise it shoulder high. Instantly two shots broke the tense silence and both men faltered slightly. Roberts was shot clean through the middle of the abdomen but Bowdre had suffered only a bruise as Buckshot's bullet cut his gunbelt off. Roberts held his ground and Bowdre ducked around a corner of the mill, the rest of the posse coming into action at once.

How Buckshot survived the next few seconds is something of a miracle. With a dozen of the Southwest's deadliest gun hands blazing away at him, he staggered against a wall and kept firing, gritting his teeth to make himself ignore the pain of the mortal wound he had received.

Then Roberts slipped back into the house and prepared for a siege. His Winchester was empty and he carried no extra shells but he found an old Sharps rifle and a six shooter. With these he put up so spirited a defense.

Buckshot was dying—and knew it. That first bullet from Bowdre's six-gun had passed completely through his bowels but the stubborn old cripple refused to quit.

The posse held another pow-wow. Brewer wanted to take Roberts alive but Coe advised waiting, arguing that Buckshot was badly hit and would die soon anyhow. Other men wanted to fire the house but Major Godfrey reminded them that it was government property.

Finally Brewer refused all advice and attempted a ruse. Creeping down around a barn and some outhouses, he managed to stay under cover until he reached a pile of logs near the mill. He was some two hundred yards from the house but he had a clear view of Buckshot's window. He fired three slugs into the opening without drawing any answering fire. Then he forgot his caution. Maybe he thought that Buckshot had collapsed from loss of blood, maybe he thought that the defense had shifted to some other window; at any rate he raised his head to take a good look. Instantly the old Sharps boomed. The bullet struck Brewer between the eyes and blasted out most of the back of his head.

That was enough for the toughest posse in the Southwest. They loaded Middleton, Coe and Bowdre into a government ambulance and departed, not waiting for death to overtake their valiant enemy.

Regardless of what may have been Buckshot's part in the black annals of Lincoln County it seems hardly just that he should fail to survive after such a battle. Many men have left their names in the record books for no reason other than that they fell victim to notorious gunmen like Hendry Brown and Billy the Kid. By any such standards Buckshot Roberts deserves a pinnacle of his own. Already crippled he fought off Lincoln County's deadliest killers—en masse.



Also In This Issue

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The strange sandstone talisman warned Britt Henderson, plainer than words, of seething hell that was about to boil over in Sage City. . . . Where each morning's sun lighted the bushwhacked corpses of honest punchers, and only Henderson blood could buy peace again for that once rich cattle-land. . . .

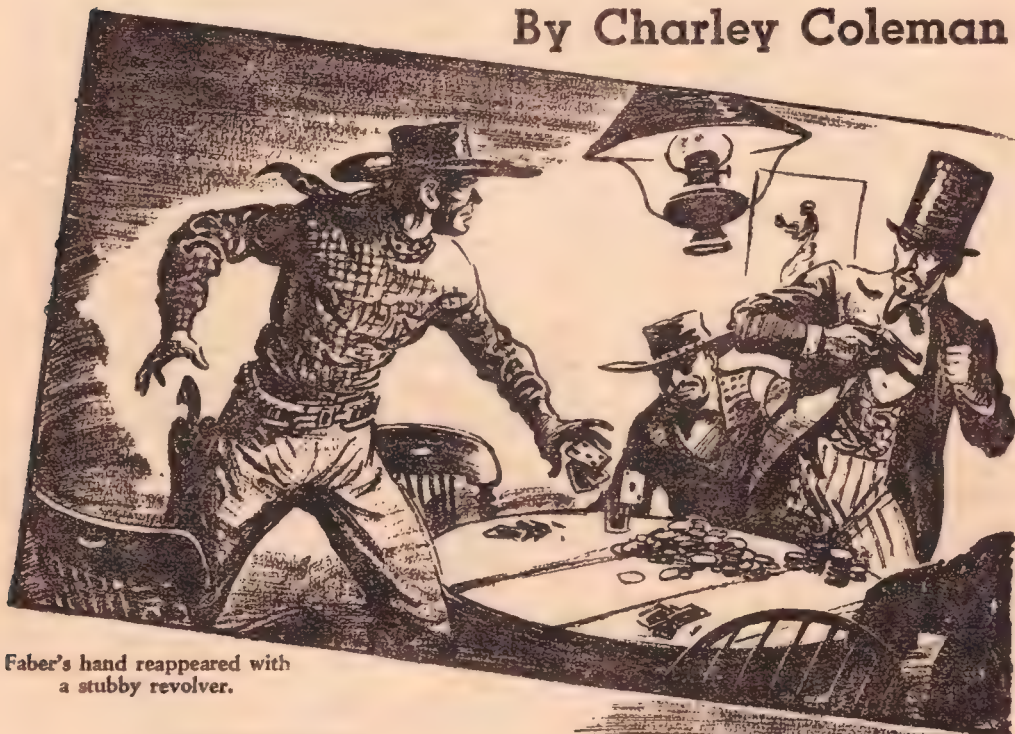
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BOOTHILL SENDS A FIGHTING MAN

Although Johnny Strong, convicted killer, had drowned in a flash-flood and his body lay deep in boothill, Blue River ranchers said that when outlaws prospered and honest men walked in fear, Johnny's flaming guns would sound again their glorious, deadly battle-cry!

By Charley Coleman



Faber's hand reappeared with
a stubby revolver.

CHAPTER ONE

"Guilty—Your Honor!"

DOWN in the Blue River Valley there's a legend that when outlaws prosper and honest men walk in fear, the ghost of Johnny Strong rides again. The legend began one night long ago, in the little cowtown of Sageville.

Burt Slade was sitting in the back room of his Queen of Spades saloon playing solitaire. An oil lamp with a green shade, suspended directly over the scarred oak table at which he sat, cast glistening highlights from the sweat that beaded his fleshy red face. Now and then he sucked nervously



An
Action
Novelette



at his iron gray mustache. He raised his hard, thick-lidded eyes to the tall, hook-nosed man who shuffled back and forth over the mouldy sawdust on the floor. He glared at him for several moments.

"Stop that damned jitterin'! You're gettin' on my nerves!"

Tex Moody gripped the table with his slender hands and thrust his narrow face toward Slade. "Didn't know you had nerves," he sneered. "Blast you, Slade! Somethin's gone wrong out there. I told you we shoulda moved them cattle while there was still time!"

Slade tossed the deck of cards on the table and folded his hands over his belly. "Trouble with you," he observed without heat, "you got no guts. First tight spot that comes along, you go yella on me. You've got a wide yella streak down your back."

Dull red mounted over Tex's high cheekbones. "I got just as much guts as the next one," he said sullenly. "It's this damn waitin' that gets me. I tell you, Slade, somethin's gone wrong. We shoulda heard by this time."

Slade spat reflectively at the polished brass cuspidor. "When Pete an' the boys ambush them ranchers, they'll scatter 'em from hell to breakfast. There won't be no fight left in 'em for a long time!"

"Just the same," Tex persisted, his voice taking on a whining note, "you gotta admit some damn funny things have been happenin'. Maybe Mark Fletcher's got somethin' helpin' him . . ." his voice sank to a hoarse whisper, and he hesitated, licking his lips, ". . . somethin' unnatural. . ."

The veins bulged on Slade's forehead. He cursed vilely, and smashed both puffy hands down on the table. "So help me, Tex," he rasped, "if you say another word about ghosts or haunts, I'll plug you!"

"It ain't you I'm afraid of," said Tex dully, "It's those other things—Slade, d'you remember the curse Johnny Strong laid on me an' you, the day he—" He broke off as he noticed that Slade had his head thrust forward and seemed to be listening intently for something. Then Tex heard it too—the sound of a horse at a dead run.

The pounding hooves grew nearer, then broke rhythm as the horse plunged to a sliding stop in the loose gravel of the alley, back of the saloon.

"You see," said Slade triumphantly, "here's the word now."

Someone crashed awkwardly through the backdoor and careened through the short dark corridor. The door was flung open, and Pete Vinson lurched through and stood there, swaying on his feet. His face was a ghastly, greenish white.

"I—I seen it," he stammered. "Johnny Strong's ghost."

IT HAD been only a few weeks before; the night that Johnny Strong had pushed through the batwing doors of the Queen of Spades saloon and sauntered toward the bar, stopping now to shake one man's hand and again to answer another's ribald greeting. His almost-new black Stetson was pushed back carelessly on his towhead, and his bright blue eyes were reckless and gay.

"How are yez, Mike me lad?" he saluted

the bartender. "An' could yez be afther tellin' me where I'd be findin' Tex Moody?"

Mike grinned and gestured with his thumb toward the backroom.

Johnny found Tex Moody sitting at a round table with Burt Slade, owner of the Queen of Spades, and Mose Faber, a gambler who worked for Slade. He said howdy to everyone, and then addressed Moody: "All set to close deal of those heifers?" Tex Moody owned the 7M brand, with headquarters twenty miles up the Blue River.

The rancher nodded, and Mose Faber flicked over Johnny with his expressionless eyes and drawled, "Johnny, goin' to raise cows now, instead of hell?"

"They say he's run his brand on one likely little heifer already," Burt Slade said, laughing coarsely and nudging Johnny's ribs with a fat-padded elbow.

Johnny masked his irritation with a good-natured grin. Somehow, Faber and Slade didn't set so well anymore, after a fellow had settled down and gotten engaged to a girl like Nancy Fletcher and everything.

"Mark Fletcher and me want a few young cows to stock our homesteads," he explained easily.

Tex Moody fished an old envelope from his pocket, and did some figuring with the stub of a pencil. "Let's see, fifty head, an' thirty dollars a head—that's fifteen hundred. You got the dinero with you, Johnny?"

Johnny nodded.

Mose Faber lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Your rich uncle from Australia die?" he asked. "The Johnny Strong we all knew couldn't hang onto fifteen cents."

Mose had no call to talk like that. Time was when Johnny would have called him on it pronto. But he didn't want any trouble tonight.

"Fact is," he explained, forcing himself to smile at the gambler, "Mark Fletcher's puttin' up the money and I'm goin' to take care of the stock."

"I can't close the deal right now," said Moody. "I left the bill of sale in my saddlebag. I just want to play a couple of hands, and then we'll close up. Stick around for a few minutes."

Slade pushed out the one empty chair.

"Why not sit in for a couple of hands yourself, Johnny? Just for old times' sake," he added hastily, as Johnny started to shake his head. "Shucks, we're just passin' the time—the stakes are practically nothin'."

"Well . . ." Johnny hesitated. After all, a couple of hands couldn't hurt anything. He'd have to stick around waiting for Moody anyhow. "Well, just for a couple of friendly hands. Here's my personal wad, let's see—four silver dollars and six bits."

An hour later, Johnny shoved the last hundred dollars of Mark Fletcher's money to meet the last raise in the last hand of poker he was ever to play. His mouth was bone dry, as he turned to Moody and croaked, "Let's see what you've got."

"Guess I misjudged this hand," Tex Moody said ruefully. "Three kings is all I got."

The tension eased in Johnny's throat, and he breathed again. "Full house," he grinned. "Three tenspots and two queens." God that had been close. He'd quit now, and never risk someone else's money.

"Don't that beat all," said Mose Faber smoothly. "I got a full house too—three jacks and two fives. Talk about luck—there I was with them two measly fives. I drew three cards, an' I was scared to look at 'em. Fact! I like to passed out when I seen them three jacks!"

Mose stood up and reached across the table to rake in the huge pot. From the sleeve of his gray broadcloth coat, three pasteboard rectangles slid out and fluttered down on top of the chips. The deuce of clubs, the seven of hearts, the nine of diamonds. Mose slowly raised his inscrutable eyes to meet Johnny's. No one spoke. Burt Slade's wheezing breath sounded loud in the little room.

Johnny stood up slowly, and Mose carefully straightened and stepped back from the table.

"You tinhorn cheat," said Johnny contemptuously. "Count out my fifteen hundred dollars and slide 'em across the table. You're through in Sageville, Faber."

Mose Faber didn't move. He eyed Johnny balefully, and his right hand was tense.

He's going to pull his gun, thought Johnny. He's going to kill me if he can.

"Easy, Faber," he cautioned. "I don't want any trouble with you. Just the fifteen hundred."

THE WORDS broke the gambler's spell, and his right hand disappeared beneath his broadcloth coat. Johnny waited until the very last minute, didn't start his draw until Faber's hand reappeared with a stubby revolver. Then he drew his Colt and fired, all in one fluid movement. He tried to get Mose through the shoulder, but he was too hurried. The gambler's soft white hands clawed frantically at his chest, and he died on his feet.

Johnny pulled his eyes from the gambler's slowly collapsing body, and, holding his gun toward Slade and Moody, he took the fifteen hundred-dollar bills from the table and stuffed them in his pocket.

"You saw it," he told them. "He drew first."

He holstered the Colt, and walked out into the main room of the saloon, closing the door behind him. White-faced, he walked through the silent room, unheeding of the curious faces turned toward him. He pushed through the swinging doors, and into the cold night air, which he sucked into his lungs.

His tense nerves relaxed as he cut diagonally across the wide, dusty road called Main Street. He began to tremble uncontrollably; his heart pounded violently, and he felt sick in his stomach.

He had himself under control again as he knocked on the door of the small gray cottage of Mark and Nancy Fletcher. But his pale, set face made Nancy exclaim, "Why, Johnny, what on earth's the matter with you?"

Johnny pulled the bills from his pocket and tossed them on the marble-topped table that was Nancy's pride. "I'm not fit to be trusted with it," he said hoarsely.

"Please tell me what happened," she begged.

Swiftly, he told her everything, exactly the way it had happened. He made no excuses; rather, he flayed himself for his weakness.

Nancy put her soft fingers over his mouth. "Don't," she said gently. "Don't torture yourself, Johnny."

"But don't you see?" Johnny said desperately. "Mark trusted me. I let him down. I'm not fit to be pardners with him."

"He'll understand, Johnny. Try to forget about it. It's all over now."

At that Mark entered the room quietly.

"It's *not* all over," he corrected his sister. "Johnny, it's my duty to put you under arrest."

"Under arrest?" repeated Johnny. "But why, Mark? He drew first."

Mark eyed him narrowly. "Did he? Burt Slade and Tex Moody tell a different story."

"I caught him cheating!" cried Johnny. "I didn't want any trouble. I just asked him for the fifteen hundred. He had his gun out before I started my draw."

"Slade and Moody say you lost the money and lost your head and accused Mose of cheating you, and then pulled your gun and shot him. They claim Mose wasn't even wearing a gun. He didn't have a gun when I got there."

"Oh, Mark," Nancy cried tragically, "can't you see they're lying?"

"He *did* have a gun," Johnny insisted, "and he *did* cheat! He shot first. He almost tagged me. I *had* to shoot him!"

Mark nodded. "The crowd in the saloon agree there was two shots. But Slade and Moody say you fired twice."

"All right, arrest me," Johnny said angrily. "Anyway, I brought the money back. And Mark, I'm sure sorry I let you down this way."

Mark shook his head absently. "The money doesn't matter now," he said distantly. "Anyway, Slade claims it belongs to him. I'll have to take it back."

"They'll never hang a cheap frameup like this on me!"

Mark eyed Johnny curiously for several long seconds. "I hope you're right," he said finally.

GERALD BLACK'S flabby jowls were flushed, and his double chin quivered with righteous indignation, as he launched into his final harangue at the twelve solemn jurors. It was seldom that the state's attorney got his teeth into something solid, like a murder case, and he was making the most of this opportunity.

"Gentlemen of the jury: I shall ask you to disregard the unwarranted attacks the defense has made against the character of the deceased. True, Mose Faber was a gambler. In the eyes of the law, however, he was a peaceful citizen, entitled to the protection of this great state.

"But what have we learned of the char-

acter of the accused? That he is a wild youth, that he is irresponsible, and unmindful of his duties as a citizen of our fair community. We have shown, gentlemen of the jury, that . . ."

The attorney's sonorous phrases rolled on and on, like the waves of an endless sea. Johnny heard the words, but they became sounds without meaning.

Nancy Fletcher sat in the front row. There were dark shadows beneath her eyes, and her face was tired and drawn but she smiled encouragement when her glance crossed Johnny's.

"—and for this dastardly crime, the state asks that you find the defendant guilty—guilty of murder in the first degree!"

Mark Fletcher took Johnny to a small room behind the judge's chambers, while the jury was deliberating. He allowed Nancy to come in, and she sat down beside Johnny and held one of his hands in both of hers. They sat there like that, without speaking, until word was brought that the jury was returning.

Judge Canton wiped the corners of his wide mouth, and cleared his throat. "Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

Len Parsons stood up. "We have, Your Honor."

"What is your verdict?"

"Guilty as charged!"

Blood pounded in Johnny's ears. Dimly he heard Nancy's tragic moan. Then Mark's strong hand was under his elbow, lifting him to his feet and guiding him toward the bar.

The judge looked at Johnny with kindly eyes. "John Strong," he said quietly, "you have been tried and found guilty by a jury of twelve good men and true. What have you to say, before sentence is passed upon you?"

Abruptly, Johnny's head cleared, and his life pulsed strong in him again. He shook off Mark's hand and took a step forward.

"Your Honor," he said clearly, "I killed Mose Faber, and I'm sorry. But I had to kill him, or be killed myself. Slade and Moody hid Mose Faber's gun—so they could get back the money they had cheated me out of!"

"They are not on trial here," the judge reminded him, in the same quiet voice. "And now, John Strong, it is the judgment

of this court that you be taken to the state penitentiary, and that there, thirty days from this day, you shall be hanged by the neck until you are dead."

A hush fell over the courtroom, broken only by Nancy's racking sobs. Johnny turned slowly and walked to the rail in front of the spectators. He stood there for a moment, gazing at Burt Slade and Tex Moody. There was a curious intensity in his gaze that forced their reluctant eyes to meet his.

"I'll come back," he told them softly. "Yes, I'll come back, from this side of the grave or the other. I'll come back and get you for what you've done to me!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Watery Grave

IT HAD been raining steadily since early morning, and now, as Johnny stood outside the express office, waiting for the stage-coach that would carry him to Barrington and the state penitentiary, a rivulet of cold water splashed from the brim of his Stetson onto his manacled wrists. He stared at the bright steel handcuffs, vaguely grateful that the rain had prevented an audience to attend his departure.

Beside him, Sheriff Chris Hawley fumed at the delay, and looked again at his watch, shielding the silver stemwinder with his slicker. "Here comes Ben now. About time!"

Down the muddy main street lurched the small coach that was the sole vehicle of the Blue Ridge Stage Company. It was drawn by four wiry mustangs, whose trotting hooves sent the water spraying high from the deep ruts in the street. Ben Thompson, the stubby driver, hauled in his team before the express office, tied the reins, and leaped down from his seat. He nodded to the sheriff and glanced with quick surprise at Johnny's wrists.

"Don't like this rain." He spat, and shifted his quid. "Don't look good at all." He entered the express office. Through the steamed window, Johnny saw the blurred figures of Ben and the express agent, waving their arms at each other in apparent disagreement. Then Ben came out again, a small iron strongbox under his arm. At the door he turned and called back.

"You just remember what I said, Roy. By God, this here is flood weather."

Johnny climbed into the stage, followed by Sheriff Hawley. A moment later, a third passenger dashed out of the express office and scrambled inside the stage. He was a mousey little man of forty or so—a drummer who called on Sageville's single hardware store twice a year.

Johnny heard the crack of Ben Thompson's whip as the small coach lumbered into motion. He shrank back into a corner, closed his eyes wearily. Presently he slept, despite the jolting of the stage.

It was late afternoon when he finally awoke to the screech of brake shoes as the coach came to a halt. He could hear Ben's profane voice rising and falling, and another voice making answer. Then the door of the coach was opened, and a stranger climbed in. He sat down beside the drummer, and tried to shake the water from his hat and slicker.

"Horse stepped in a hole," he explained. He was a blond young man, of about Johnny's size, and beneath the wet slicker he wore the conventional denim jumper and levis of the range country. "Lucky thing I seen the stage comin'. Reckon I'll ride on to Barrington. It's gonna be a helluva night!"

"What you doin' out here?" grunted Chris Hawley.

"Lookin' for strays. I'm a new hand on Tex Moody's outfit. Name is Cliff Mawson." The cowpuncher's alert eyes noticed but politely ignored the cuffs on Johnny's hands.

THE SHERIFF did not reply, and for several minutes the only sound in the cramped interior of the coach was the drumming of rain on the roof. The drumming slowly gained in volume, until at length it was deafening.

"Regular cloudburst!" Hawley shouted. The little drummer washed his hands together, and cringed as each new fury of rain deluged the coach. The coach lurched to a standstill. They could hear Ben Thompson shouting assurance to his horses.

Chris Hawley clawed open the door and ran to help Thompson hold his maddened team, with Cliff Mawson close upon his heels. Johnny followed them clumsily, handicapped by his manacled wrists. He

ran to the front of the coach and seized the bridle of a plunging, wild-eyed wheel horse. For nearly half an hour they were buffeted, submerged by a solid wall of water. Then, abruptly, the downfall stopped.

"Let's get started," said the sheriff.

Thompson was intent on untangling the harness. "Told Roy we'd run into trouble," he complained bitterly.

Johnny spoke for the first time since the trip had begun. "Couple miles ahead we have to cross Antelope Wash," he told Thompson and the sheriff. "After this cloudburst there's danger of a flash flood." He paused, and laughed bitterly. "Not that it makes much difference to me."

Chris Hawley rubbed his jaw uncertainly. "What do you think, Ben?"

"I say let's go on through. It's easy goin' after we cross the wash."

Cliff Mawson nodded his agreement.

The little drummer, who had emerged from the coach, bleated frantically, "No—it's dangerous—let's turn back!"

"Johnny?"

Johnny shrugged, and did not reply.

"Let's go, then," the sheriff decided. "It's three agin one, with Johnny not votin' one way or the other."

Antelope Wash was a shallow depression, some four hundred yards across, that had been eaten out by countless freshets. Water already ran inches deep across the road when Ben Thompson set the brakes and eased the coach down the sloping bank. The wheels cut deep into the mud, and the four horses had to strain against their collars as they splashed through the water.

The coach was halfway across the wash, when they heard a rolling thunder that rapidly grew louder. Ben Thompson's mahogany face lost its color. He stood up and began to lash his horses, and screamed insanely at them. A glance at his companions told the drummer what was up, and he cowered in his corner.

The thunder was louder, nearer. "We'll never make it," groaned the sheriff.

The wheels of the coach jolted onto hard gravel and the horses, crazed by the driver's whip, began to gallop.

"We got a chance!" shouted Cliff Mawson, sticking his head out the window and looking ahead. "Almost there!"

The thunder deepened into an angry roar, with wild, screaming overtones. With

mounting terror, the four men in the coach watched the bend in the wash a quarter-mile away. The swaying stage moved snail-like toward the safety of the bank.

And then, around the bend, came a solid wall of water ten feet high. Huge breakers lashed the ground before the flood, catching large rocks and hurling them ahead, then lost momentum and were swept up into the racing wall of water again. Huge trees spun like twigs in the maelstrom. The scream of the flood was shattering.

The little drummer uttered a piercing wail, and then the stage was smashed, bounced end over end on the boulder-strewn wash. The frenzied neighs of the horses were strangled in the great wave, and they were battered along behind the wreckage of the coach, until their harnesses broke apart.

Johnny was hurled from the coach. A wave threw him backward over the crest of the wall of water. He was wrenched, buffeted, flung this way and that by the fury of the flood. A heavy branch drove into his shoulder and pushed him below the surface. His head smashed against something on the ground, and his consciousness dimmed. Only a small spark remained to tell him that he must fight, fight. . . .

JOHNNY slowly fought his way upward, out of the deep black pit into which he had fallen. Great waves of pain beat against the top of his skull in an agonizing rhythm. It took enormous concentration to open his eyes. He saw blurred, fantastic shapes, and the bright light seared into his brain. He retched violently.

After a few minutes, his brain began to clear and he felt better. He had been flung up on a rock-strewn slope, half-buried in silty earth and the debris of the flood. Masses of dark clouds still swirled in the overcast sky; towering thunderheads hovered threateningly above the setting sun.

The flood had passed on, eventually to be swallowed by the arid wastelands below, leaving Antelope Wash dotted with shallow pools and strewn with wreckage. Not far away was the splintered undercarriage of the stagecoach, half-buried in sand. Here and there lay a hub, a door, a spoke. One wheel had come to rest intact against the bloated belly of a horse. A man's body lay half-submerged in a pool of water. Johnny

recognized the blue serge trousers and black buttoned shoes. Ben Thompson was spread-eagled on his back, with his head smashed open against a boulder.

Far down the wash, Johnny spied a small, dirty-yellow mound. He recalled that the sheriff had worn a yellow slicker. The body of Cliff Mawson lay nearby, curled up on its side like a child asleep.

Johnny knelt beside the battered thing that had once been the symbol of the law—the law that was going to hang him in thirty days. He thought about the strange prank Fate had played by letting him—Johnny Strong—survive the flood. He should have died with the others. For what good was a month? He stirred, and his lips moved, slowly mouthing that word. A month . . . one month . . . there were thirty days

He walked over to Cliff Mawson's body, turned it over, and swallowed hard when he saw the mask of raw flesh and shattered bones.

He steeled himself for the job. First he emptied his pockets and spread the contents on the ground. Then he removed everything from Mawson's pockets. He studied the two piles for a moment; then scooped up the dead man's belongings and stowed them in his pockets.

His own belongings he stuffed in Mawson's pockets. Then he pulled the lifeless wrists together and snapped the handcuffs on them.

So battered was poor Mawson's body that identification would be all but impossible. Besides, Johnny reasoned, there was no record of Mawson's having been on the

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in a month, and twenty-four hours in a day, and every hour had sixty minutes. . .

Compelled by a sudden urgency, he began fumbling awkwardly through the sheriff's pockets. He found what he sought—a small, flat key. It took him a long time before he discovered how to twist his wrists around so that he could insert the key. Finally he was free.

He rose to his feet, panting heavily, and stood there above the sheriff's body while he considered his next move. It was growing dark. It would be morning before men rode out to find the missing stage. He must run, must get far away; for in a few hours the word would flash that Johnny Strong was at large. Johnny Strong, the murderer. Dead or alive, the posters would say, and blood money would bewitch the friends of yesterday.

But need he run? Need he be hunted down like a wild animal? For the solution lay before him, though the audacity of the plan caused him to stop breathing for long seconds while his mind besieged it, seeking flaws. Satisfied at last, he stooped and thrust the key into the sheriff's vest pocket.

stage. Most men, seeing the handcuffs, would at once see Johnny Strong's body. Others would note the blond hair, the length and thickness of the body. And a few would paw over the contents of the pockets. But who would say, "How do we know that this is Johnny Strong, when his face cannot be recognized?"

Yes, it was almost perfect. He was free. Free to laugh, and sing, and shout. Free . . . to go back. For suddenly he knew which way his road led.

Thunder rumbled across the skies again; a heavy rain began to fall. Johnny threw his head back and laughed wildly. For the rain was his friend. The rain had freed him, and the rain would hide his footsteps in the soft mud of Antelope Wash.

NANCY FLETCHER sat on the bed in her small room, to which she had retreated to escape the well-meant sympathies of the neighbors. Ever since the funeral earlier in the afternoon she had been engulfed in their clumsy condolences. "There, there, you poor girl," they kept saying; "you'll get over it."

But she wouldn't get over it, not ever. Where the warm, pulsing heart of her had been, there was now an aching void. Part of her had died too; part of her had been battered against the boulders. A part that could never be replaced.

She rose from the bed mechanically. She couldn't stay here. She had to get out of this stifling little room.

A few minutes later she found herself riding out over the billowing waves of bunchgrass that swept upward to the hills. Unconsciously she had headed the mare toward the little glen with the bubbling spring.

She dropped the mare's reins. The only sounds in the glen were the gurgling of the spring, the soft evening breeze sighing through the pines, the little crunching noises made by the mare as she grazed the sweet grass. Nothing had changed. Everything was the same as it had been that night when Johnny had said, "I've never amounted to much, but I could, if I had you to make it mean something."

Tears blurred her vision; she sank down beside the spring and yielded to the storm inside her breast. "Johnny, Johnny," she sobbed aloud, "where are you now?"

"Nancy!"

She raised her head, saw him walking toward her. So perfect was the illusion that she shuddered, and buried her face in her hands. Was she going mad, to be tortured thus?

"Nancy. It's me. It's Johnny."

Oh, no, no. . . . not this! Fighting wildly for her very sanity, she stumbled to her feet and ran blindly toward the mare.

A hand closed gently on her arm. "Don't be afraid, honey. It's really me. I wasn't drowned in the flood."

She turned. It was Johnny. Johnny, with his face bruised and cut and unshaven. A mud-plastered scarecrow of a man—but Johnny none the less.

She flung fierce arms around his neck, kept babbling his name. It was really Johnny; his arms held her tightly and his lips whispered brokenly in her ear, and everything was all right again.

Then the significance of his presence pierced her mind. She pushed back against his arms and stared up into his face. "Johnny," she said, her eyes wide with apprehension, "who—who—"

Johnny divined her meaning. "It was a stranger. He'd lost his horse, and hailed the stage. I had to do it, honey." He smiled a little with his mouth, but his eyes were haunted. "Now I'm dead, you see. No one is hunting me down."

She nodded. "It doesn't matter, dear. But you shouldn't be here. You've got to go. Right away, Johnny. Some place far away."

He gripped her shoulders firmly, and spoke with slow emphasis. "I can't go. I've got to stay and clear my name. Don't you see, honey? I've got to make up for letting Mark down."

"No!" she cried in terror. "You'll be caught—and sent back to that place."

"That's a risk I'll have to run."

"Please, Johnny! I beg you, take the mare and go now. Go far away. I love you, Johnny. I'll follow you anywhere, whenever you send for me."

She saw that he was unmoved, and buried her head on his shoulder.

"I told Slade and Moody I'd come back," he said finally, and something in his voice made her blood run cold.

She knew her battle was lost, but still she fought. "What can you do alone? Slade's men are hired killers. Every man's hand will be turned against you. If you're caught. . . ."

"But I won't be alone," Johnny corrected her gently. "I'll have you on my side. And Mark."

"Not Mark!" Nancy cried. "Mark mustn't know, Johnny. Never. For no matter what his feelings were, no matter if he thought you were innocent, he'd take you back—unless you killed him."

"Mark'll be he acting sheriff now," mused Johnny. "He'll enforce *all* the laws. That means he'll have to fight Slade."

Nancy shivered. "He'll be all alone too."

"No," resolved Johnny. "He won't be alone. I'll be near to help him, though he'll not know it. Together, we'll beat Slade."

CHAPTER THREE

Undercover Deputy

MARK FLETCHER sat at the spurscarred desk in his cubbyhole of an office in the courthouse. Tilted back on his chair with his fingers twined together be-

hind his head, he was a picture of calm confidence. But his mind was troubled about many things.

About Nancy, for instance. Her first wild grief had been normal enough, but now, less than a month since Johnny's death, she was her bright-eyed, cheerful self again. Too much so. There was some undercurrent of nervous tension—as though she were waiting for something to happen.

Had Johnny been innocent? For the thousandth time, he turned that question over in his mind. It could have happened as Johnny had claimed. Mark had examined the backroom of the Queen of Spades to find where Faber's bullet had ploughed through floor or wall; but there had been other duels in that room, and the walls were pocked with bullet holes. If it had been only Burt Slade's word against Johnny's—but Tex Moody was a substantial citizen, a big rancher.

And then there were the rustlers. They had always been active, but never so much so, as now. The ranchers were riding in almost daily to complain of mounting losses. He cursed the maze of narrow canyons that made the Oxshoe Mountains a natural haven for rustlers.

"Penny for your thoughts!"

Startled, Mark glanced up to see Burt Slade standing in the doorway, gold teeth a-glitter in a hearty smile.

"I been meanin' to have a little talk with you, Mark," said the saloon-keeper, slumping heavily into the chair Mark indicated. "That fifteen hundred Johnny Strong lost that night—I've sorta had it on my mind, Mark. It was your money, and it ain't fair you should lose it." He fumbled in his coat pocket and drew out a wad of greenbacks.

Mark shook his head coldly. "I gave the money to Johnny. He lost it, you say. That's all there is to it."

"Oh, hell, Mark! What's a measly fifteen hundred between friends?"

"For me to take that money," said Mark stiffly, "would be the same as taking a bribe."

Slade waved his hands mildly. "That's pinning a hard name on it," he protested. "Let's call it a friendly agreement."

"Agreement about what?"

There was a calculating expression in Slade's hard eyes. He seemed to be weigh-

ing Fletcher. "I'll deal 'em face up," he began finally. "Blackie says you come down to my place this morning and said you was closin' all the games down."

Mark nodded. "Against the law."

Slade laughed. "I get it, Mark. Well, it was against the law when Chris Hawley was sheriff. I'll give you the same as I give him. Two hundred a month. What do you say?"

"Nothing doing."

"Not enough, eh?" Slade frowned, and then said flatly, "I'll make it three hundred—but that's my final word."

"No," Mark said evenly. "And that's my final word. Not for three hundred or three thousand. I'm going to enforce every law on the books! That's what a sheriff is for!"

Slade dropped his mask of geniality. "An honest lawman, eh?" he said thickly. "You've laid down your law. Now I'll lay down mine—they games are going to run tonight same as always. You close 'em, and Sageville'll have a new sheriff before there's a new moon!"

Mark's square face was thoughtful when Slade stamped out of the office. The saloon-keeper had made no idle boast, for he could summon a dozen or more of the hangers-on at the Queen of Spades; men who would run any risk—if it paid enough.

HE WAS not surprised to learn that Chris Hawley had been in Slade's pay, for he had guessed that long ago. But he had not realized how much Slade had been paying for the sheriff's apparent blindness.

Slade must have boasted of his ultimatum to Mark Fletcher, for word of the impending showdown raced through Sageville and was carried out to the ranches. When Mark walked down the main street at eight o'clock that evening, many merchants and ranchers had gathered in little knots along the board walks. By the time he reached the Queen of Spades, he was followed by an apparently casual crowd.

Mark pushed through the doors, took two or three deliberate steps, and stood surveying the interior, muscular legs planted solidly and big, capable hands on the butts of his Colts. The crowd behind him broke to either side, like a herd of cattle upon meeting an obstacle, and found places at the bar or around the room.

There was a larger crowd than usual.

Poker, faro, and blackjack flourished at several tables, although play had halted abruptly when Mark entered. The gamblers who ran the games were looking around the room uncertainly; one of them got up and disappeared through the door to the backroom where Johnny Strong had killed Mose Faber.

Burt Slade appeared in the doorway almost immediately. He took in the situation at a glance, and although a smile came to his mouth, his red face became redder still with pent-up rage. "Well, sheriff, what can we do for you?" he boomed heartily.

"Close up the games—now," Mark spoke quietly, yet his voice carried clearly in the now silent room. He watched while the gamblers, at a nod from Slade, cashed the chips and gathered their paraphernalia.

"Another thing," said Mark more sharply. "Beginning tomorrow, I'm checking on all the strange faces I see here. There's sixty days at hard labor waiting for vagrants." He paused, and then smiled a little. "The road commissioner tells me our roads are in pretty bad shape."

A laugh began among the ranchers and merchants. It grew in volume until the lamps swayed—but it was not shared by Slade and his tin horns and gunmen.

"Anyone who wants to debate about our laws here in Sageville," concluded Mark, "is liable to become a permanent citizen." And he tapped the polished butts of his guns significantly.

NANCY FLETCHER shook her head stubbornly. "I'm still worried, Mark. Slade isn't one to give up this easy. He'll have someone shoot you."

Her brother looked at her queerly. "Maybe so," he said at length. "Anyhow, there's no gambling at the Queen of Spades, and there hasn't been for a whole week. That's a record for Sageville. And all of Slade's gunmen and tin horns seem to have left."

Nancy glanced at the clock and exclaimed, "It's late! I'm going to bed. And you'd better not sit up any longer either, Mark."

"All right, sis," he grunted good-naturedly. He stood up, yawned, and stretched his arms wide. Then he dropped an arm over Nancy's shoulders and said, with clumsy tenderness, "How are things with you? I've been worried about you."

"I'm mending," she replied, smiling a

little sadly. "Mark, do you still think Mose Faber was unarmed that night?"

He frowned. "If it was just Slade's word against Johnny's, there wouldn't be any doubt in my mind. But don't forget—Tex Moody was there too."

"Has it ever occurred to you," she asked earnestly, "that Moody might be working with Slade? Slade must have a hand in the rustling—but he doesn't know cattle, so he must be in cahoots with someone who does. And Moody's ranch backs up to the Oxshoe Mountains."

"But he's been having some of the biggest losses," objected Mark.

"So he says!" Nancy shot back.

"There's no evidence against him."

"No," she admitted. "He's pretty slick. But, Mark—keep your eyes open, won't you?" She kissed his rough cheek and went to her room.

Mark puzzled over her words. If Moody were leading the rustlers, it would be easy for him to spirit his neighbors' cattle into the mountains, while moaning, as Nancy had said, about his own losses. But, damn it, there wasn't a single shred of evidence against Moody.

If he ever discovered that Moody *was* in league with Slade, he'd turn in his star and hunt down the rancher, to shoot it out, man to man. For he had never admitted to anyone, not even his sister, how sorely he had felt Johnny's conviction and subsequent death. They had had great plans, he and Johnny. They had grown up together, worked as cowhands on the same ranches, filed on adjoining homesteads. And when Johnny finally became aware that Nancy no longer was a pig-tailed brat, why that made things even better. . . .

A scuffling noise just outside the window by which he was sitting broke in upon his thoughts. There was a stifled gasp, then a thud.

Mark dove to the floor, scrambled toward the door on all fours. He eased open the door and poked his head out cautiously. Nothing came to his ears except the normal sounds of the night. Revolver in his right hand, he walked slowly around the corner of the house. Off to his right a twig crackled loudly, and he instinctively spun on his heel and snapped a shot at the dim figure which sprinted toward the picket fence. As he threw down for a second

shot, his arm was knocked up and the bullet went skyward.

"Stop it, Mark!" cried Nancy.

"Let go my arm!" Mark hissed furiously.

The running figure vaulted the fence. A second later hooves drummed loudly on the road and rapidly faded into the distance.

"Look!" cried Nancy, pointing. There, in the shaft of yellow light that spilled from the window, lay a man. He was unconscious, but he still clutched a long-barreled .45. Mark knelt beside him.

"Who is it?" asked Nancy.

He rolled the man over, recognized him vaguely as one of the gunmen who had hung around the Queen of Spades.

"He was going to shoot you," breathed Nancy. "That other man must have hit him on the head."

"It's beyond me," Mark said crossly. "I'll throw him in jail and have a talk with him in the morning. But what I want to know is why did you throw my arm up?"

"I just did it on the spur of the moment," said Nancy. "But if I hadn't, you'd have shot someone who must have been trying to protect you."

"Yes—but who?"

"One of your friends," she said vaguely.

Mark hesitated, and then said slowly, "You know, Nancy, another funny thing happened yesterday. Along about noon, I was riding through a little canyon over in the Oxshoes. All of a sudden, I saw one of Slade's men sitting against a big boulder alongside the trail. He was knocked out cold, just like this fellow. There wasn't anyone in sight. I galloped down to a bend in the canyon, just in time to see a rider disappearing a long way ahead. He was riding a white horse. And Nancy, the funny thing was that at a distance he was a dead ringer for Johnny."

"That's ridiculous," said Nancy faintly.

Mark was still kneeling beside the unconscious gunman. In the yellow light from the window, Nancy could see that his face was drawn in a puzzled scowl.

"You know, sis, I've got an odd sort of feeling—as though maybe Johnny didn't drown in the flood—and the way you've

been acting lately, Nancy—somehow things don't add up right."

"It's chilly out here," said Nancy, in a tight little voice. "I'm going back to bed." And she walked swiftly toward the door, leaving a befuddled brother to stare after her.

THE next day Mark received a strange letter. It was printed on a sheet of foolscap, and there was no signature. It read:

If you want to find the place where the rustlers are hiding the missing cattle, ride from Stinking Springs straight toward Thumb Mountain. When you hit Horse Creek, turn to the left and ride up the creek bed until you come to the third draw. Behind the mesquite at the end of the draw is a large cave that leads through to a big canyon with grass and water. It is guarded. Be careful.

Mark studied the note carefully. Could it be a trap? he asked himself. Or could it be from the mysterious rider on the white horse? It would be a fool trick to ride out there and get his head blown off. Yet this note meant something, one way or another, and he had to find out. For the ranchers were aroused, and election was not far off.

He closed his eyes, picturing the blind draw described in the letter. After a moment, a picture began to form in his mind, and he realized that he had ridden into that draw, though never to the end of it. He kept his eyes closed, frowning with concentration, until he had remembered how to approach the draw from the opposite direction.

Two hours later, he was creeping through the thorned mesquite trees that choked the rocky draw. A narrow trail threaded through the brush. All tracks had been artfully removed, but, knowing what to look for, Mark's practiced eyes read the story. Cattle had been passing over this narrow trail, a few head at a time. The most recent signs were only a few days old.

When he came to the end of the brush, he found the mouth of the cave. It was roughly circular in shape, and about six feet high. The sand on the floor of the cave

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE INFANTRY—THE DOUGHBOY DOES IT!

was trodden down by countless hoof prints. Mark stole along through the gloom of the cave, which twisted to the left and then to the right, and had a perceptible downward slope. Rounding one of the turns, he saw a hundred feet ahead the sunlight end of the cave. He paused just inside. A broad path fanned outward and down, leading to the grass-carpeted floor of the canyon. Big steers—hundreds of them—contentedly munched the lush growth along the banks of the little stream that meandered through the canyon.

He stepped out of the cave to scout the canyon.

"Like it, sheriff?" drawled a hard voice from just behind him.

It was characteristic of Mark that he did not jump or try for his gun, but merely raised his hands shoulder high. He turned then, moving with casual slowness, and faced his captor, whom he recognized as another of Slade's hardbitten gunhands.

"Must be my lucky day," said the gunman. "Your carcass'll fetch me a thousand dollars." His eyes narrowed as he thumbed back the hammer of his pistol.

A tiny sound just then made Mark look upward. "Look out!" he shouted instinctively, leaping backward.

The gunman snorted derisively. "That's an old tr—" He never finished the sentence. A massive boulder knocked him to the ground smashing his skull.

Mark had a fleeting impression of a man's figure poised momentarily at the edge of the cliff above him. "You, up there!" he shouted, plunging up the sloping talus. The sound of bootheels running on the rocks came to his ears above his labored breathing, and he stopped, realizing the futility of the chase.

For the third time, his unknown friend had saved his life. But who—and why?

Mark had enough for one day, and he retreated through the cave, obliterating his tracks as he went.

MARK gazed in turn at each of the ranchers whom he had assembled for a secret meeting at his home. "You've heard the story, gentlemen," he said presently. "What do you suggest?"

"I say let's smoke 'em out!" said Dick Fadiman savagely. "I've lost two or three hundred head of Lazy-F stuff already."

Several of the others nodded their agreement.

"Let's not rush into this," objected Tex Moody. "We got to organize real careful. It'll take four-five days anyhow."

"No, Tex," decided Mark, "the sooner we strike the better. Can you all meet at Stinking Springs tomorrow night?"

"I'll be there with four men," promised Tim Daniels.

"There'll be six from the Lazy-F," said Fadiman.

The pledges of the other ranchers blended into a blur of noise. Mark threw up his hands. "Wait a minute! We can't take an army. Now, there's six of you here tonight. Each of you bring one man. That'll make an even dozen."

Tim Daniels frowned. "Say, sheriff—countin' you that'll make thirteen."

"Not superstitious, are you, Tim?" laughed Mark.

"No," the grizzled cowman shook his head dubiously, "only some of these things you been telling—like the rock falling on that jasper's head—well, they're kinda spooky, that's all."

The others hoorawed him.

"Just the same," he persisted, "I got a hunch that somethin' bad's gonna happen."

After the meeting had broken up, Tex Moody mounted his horse and started for his ranch. A short distance out of town, however, he circled back. But although he approached the rear of the Queen of Spades with great caution, he did not see the shadowy figure that trailed him and that crouched beneath the open window of the saloon's backroom after he had slipped furtively through the door.

The fat proprietor of the Queen of Spades was seated at the table, engaged in his endless game of solitaire.

"All hell's broke loose," Moody told him. "Somehow or other, the sheriff's stumbled onto our canyon."

Slade viciously slapped down a card. "Them guards paralyzed?"

"That's the funny part of it, Burt. Accordin' to Fletcher, one of 'em got the drop on him—and then a big rock come droppin' down on his head." The rancher shivered. "I don't like it, I tell you. Twice we tried to gun the sheriff. Both times, the boys had drawn a bead—and then *wham!* and that's all they remember. And now this

thing happens out in the canyon. It's uncanny."

Slade's golden teeth sheared off the tip of a cigar. "Quit scarin' yourself," he advised matter-of-factly. "Fletcher's got himself an undercover deputy."

"If he has," Moody said sullenly, "he don't know it."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Maybe this here helper ain't exactly a man," the rancher elaborated reluctantly.

"A ghost maybe?" jeered Slade.

"I keep thinkin' about what Johnny Strong said to me and you in the—"

"Shut your face, Tex!"

"I'll come back," he says, "I'll come back from this side of the grave or the other. I'll come back an' get you," Moody doggedly concluded. "Damn it, Slade, I curse the day I ever helped you frame that boy!"

"You're an old woman!" derided Slade. "Now quit your caterwaulin' an' listen close. Round up all the boys—there oughta be twenty-thirty at least. Hide 'em up that first draw you come to when you ride up the creek. When them ranchers ride past, hit 'em from the side. Don't let one of 'em get away. We'll learn 'em a lesson they won't soon forget!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death in the Moonlight

THIRTEEN riders gathered at Stinking Springs. A burning desert wind moaned dismally, as it stung man and horse alike with its grit-laden breath. Under the fitful light of a crescent moon, the posse rode toward Thumb Mountain, the peak of which was obscured by low, scudding clouds.

They rode in silence, save for the creak of leather and the rhythmic thud of hooves on sand. Their faces were set and taut. One thought weighed upon their minds: that some of them might never ride again. And each man told himself *it won't be me*.

One of the men cursed suddenly, and reined his horse aside.

"It's Tex Moody," someone said.

Mark rode back. "What's wrong, Tex?"

"Damn bronc's gone lame on me," Moody complained bitterly.

"My horse'll carry double," offered one of the ranchers.

"No," vetoed Mark. "That would cramp our style. You'll just have to go back."

"Whatever you say," Moody agreed quickly—a shade too quickly, thought Mark. And the owner of the 7M rode slowly back toward Sageville.

"You satisfied now, Tim?" demanded Dick Fadiman. "There's twelve of us left now."

"I still got a hunch," was Tim Daniels' dark reply.

They rode slowly up the graveled creek bed, the water rippling stirrup-high. The pale moon, free for a moment from its pall of clouds, turned the creek to molten silver, and limned the mouth of the first draw running off to the right.

Then, as the posse drew abreast of the draw, a large troop of horsemen charged down upon them, yelling hoarsely and firing their pistols as they came.

"Spread out!" roared Mark. The ambushers were almost upon them. He fired his carbine as rapidly as he could lever in new shells, but his milling horse upset his aim.

Panic seized the ranchers. Some of the horses bolted. The seven or eight remaining riders clustered together in the creek. One man grunted in pain as a bullet struck him. A horse screamed and lunged convulsively.

And then it happened. The solid body of charging horsemen dissolved into a welter of threshing horses and shrieking men. First the leading horses fell headlong, as though a wire had been stretched across the mouth of the draw; the second wave piled up on the first, and the third on the second.

"Give 'em hell!" Mark shouted, flinging aside his carbine and drawing both Colts. The remaining members of the posse joined him, and poured a torrent of bullets into the shambles at the mouth of the draw.

But the odds were too heavy. The rustlers who untangled themselves from the pile-up found cover behind rocks, and began to pick off the horsemen in the moonlit creek, one by one. Mark's horse went down beneath him. He sprang free, but a bullet smashed into his thigh and he sank to his knees.

Scarcely a minute had passed since the ambush was sprung, yet only two of the possemen were still firing. The seven or eight surviving rustlers closed in, firing as they came. A rancher coughed, and dropped his revolver into the creek. Mark staggered

erect, shook the water from the barrel of his Colt, and dropped the foremost rustler. Then his hammer fell upon an empty cartridge. A rustler yelped savagely and shot at him. An intense flame seared through Mark's ribs.

Out of the gloom of the narrow draw thundered a pale horse. Its rider held a blazing pistol in each hand. Down upon the rustlers he rode, into their very midst, his guns spewing death. He shot at point-blank range and wasted no bullets.

One rustler survived the holocaust, and he spurred his horse into the creek and fled, gibbering in terror. "Johnny Strong's ghost!" Mark heard him yammer as he rode by.

The rider on the pale horse splashed into the creek in pursuit. The wan moonlight fell squarely on his face.

"Johnny!" sighed Mark. "It was you . . . it was you. . ."

PETE VINSON grabbed the whiskey bottle off the table in front of Slade, tilted it, and took several swallows of the fiery rotgut.

"It was Johnny Strong's ghost, I tell you!" he gasped. "Seen him plain as I see you. Rode right outa nowhere on a white horse, throwin' as much lead as ten live men!"

"What did I tell you!" cried Tex Moody accusingly.

"Shut up, both of you!" snarled Slade. "Get hold of yourself, Pete. What happened out there?"

"We hit a stretched wire and piled up." the gunman mumbled. "God, it was awful. Horses and men, all in a heap, screamin' and dyin' we got 'em all but the sheriff and one other—then the ghost come—I was the only one that got away. . . ."

"Why d'you say it was Johnny Strong's ghost?" rasped Slade.

"Because I seen him," Vinson said hoarsely. "I knew him well before he—"

"If you seen him," Slade cut in, "then he ain't dead. Ghosts don't stretch wire nor use sixguns!"

Moody and Vinson stared at him goggle-eyed.

"You're crazy," Moody finally muttered. "Hell, Burt, we all *seen* the body."

"Remember that face?" Slade returned savagely. "Coulda been anybody."

"But the handcuffs!" protested Moody.

"And there wasn't nobody on the stage but Chris Hawley and Johnny and that drummer," put in Vinson.

"Wait a minute!" Slade quelled them. "Didn't one of your hands disappear the night of the big rain, Moody?"

The rancher nodded sullenly. "Yeah. Cliff Mawson."

"And you found his horse, with a broken leg and a bullet through its head, not far from the road to Barrington?" pursued Slade.

"That's right," said Moody, a sudden gleam of interest in his nervous eyes.

"Here's what happened," said Slade, sitting forward in his chair and pounding a fat fist on the table for emphasis. "Here's this Mawson feller, with his hoss dead and a big storm blowin' up. He sees the stage comin'. He hails it. When the stage gets caught in Antelope Wash, Johnny Strong comes out alive. He sees Mawson and gets the idea of puttin' the cuffs on him. And it's been him that's been pullin' all these mysterious stunts!"

"A fairy story," sneered Moody, "if ever I heard one."

"We'll just see," predicted Slade grimly. "If it's Mawson that's buried out there, is there any way to tell for sure?"

"Burt!" Moody whispered apprehensively. "What are you—"

"Can you recognize the body?" demanded Slade.

Moody nodded reluctantly. "He had two toes missin' on one foot. Got 'em frozen somewhere up in Montana."

"Come on," ordered Slade. "We'll dig up the grave. If it ain't Johnny Strong that's buried there, there'll be the biggest manhunt this range has ever seen. We'll let the law hang him for us!"

Pete Vinson clawed at his collar. "Not me!" he said hoarsely. "I ain't no grave-robber!" As he whirled to leave, Slade caught up the whiskey bottle and smashed it against the back of his skull. Without a sound, Vinson slumped to the floor.

Moody knelt beside him briefly. "Damn you, Burt," he said, "you hit him too hard. He's dead."

"Too bad," Slade said callously. "Let's go."

"I don't cotton to this business either," Moody said nervously.

Slade paused, and dropped a meaty hand to the butt of his Colt. "Make up your mind," he said grimly.

"All right, all right," Moody gave in.

BUT the rancher was terrified, and by the time they reached the small graveyard on the edge of Sageville, he could scarcely contain the fear that gnawed inside him. It was very still, there in the graveyard, save for the whispering cottonwood leaves. The tenuous light of the moon, filtering through the dense grove, cast alternate bands of light and shadow across the graves. A small white headstone marked the raw mound that was Johnny Strong's grave.

"Dig!" commanded Slade, thrusting a shovel into Moody's reluctant hands.

Unhappily the rancher sank the pointed shovel in the soft loam. He worked frantically, flinging the dirt helter-skelter. Finally he paused, gasping for breath, and leaned upon the shovel. It was then that he saw Johnny Strong, riding toward them across a moonlit opening among the black trees.

Moody let the shovel fall. "My God, Burt," he mouthed, pointing toward the specter. He heard Slade's convulsive gasp and knew that the saloonkeeper too had been touched by the same nameless dread.

The apparition halted, some fifty feet away. "I've come back!" it said in a hollow voice that was like Johnny Strong's—and yet was not the same.

Moody cracked. "Johnny!" he quavered. "If you're alive, I'll clear you—I swear it, Johnny. I'll tell 'em how Slade hid the gun—"

Slade roared his rage. Pulling his gun, he shot his confederate through the spine once, twice, three times, spacing his shots with vicious savagery.

"Now you, Johnny Strong!" shrieked Slade. "We'll see if you're flesh and blood—or what!" He sighted his stubby revolver at the approaching figure, vaguely wishing he had a long-barreled Peacemaker and a brighter light to aim it by.

Slade fired. The phantom continued to walk toward him. Slade fired again, just as a cloud hid the moon. He stood there, waiting ankle-deep in the raw loam of Johnny Strong's grave, and the sound of his labored breathing was loud in his ears.

The blood pounded violently in Slade's ears. He ripped open the neck of his shirt, breathed jerkily through his mouth. Instinctively, and without aiming, he snapped a shot at the relentless figure. The bullet had no effect. He snapped the trigger again then hurled the revolver from him when he realized it was empty.

Now the phantom was so close Slade could make out every feature. It was Johnny Strong. Or his ghost. *Bullets can't hurt the dead!*

The figure stopped a dozen feet away, slowly raised its arm and leveled an accusing finger. "*I said I would come back,*" repeated the hollow voice. "*You sent me to my death, Slade. You—*"

But Slade's heart, abused by years of rich food and hard liquor, had given away. He pitched over Tex Moody's body.

Minutes later, a cluster of frightened townsmen ventured through the dense grove. There, by the light of their lanterns, they read the ghoulish tale.

"I told you I seen Johnny Strong's ghost," cried Tim Daniels.

That was enough for the townsmen, and they retreated hastily to a haven of bright light and hard liquor.

And so the legend of Johnny Strong's ghost began. . .

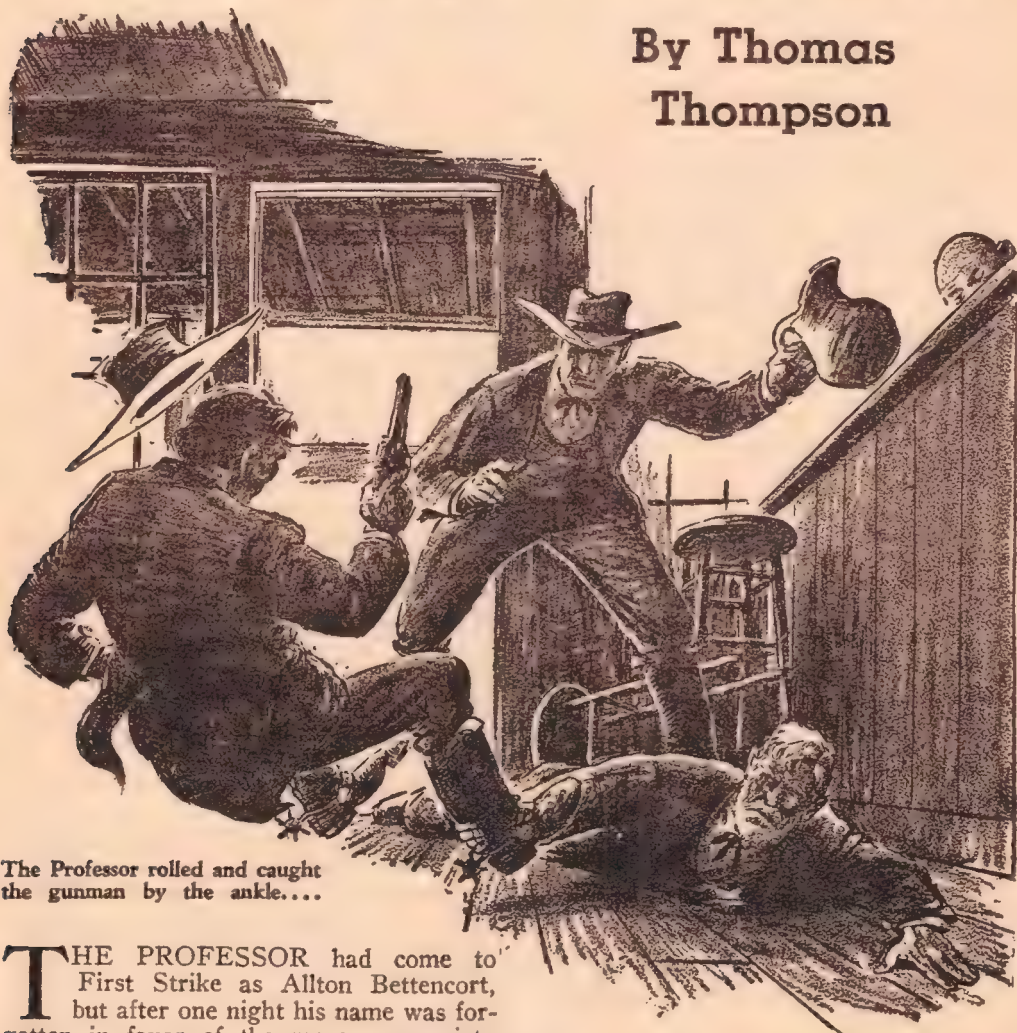
There was peace in the Blue River valley again. And the grass grew and the cattle fattened and the ranchers prospered. Mark Fletcher had recovered from his bullet wounds and had resumed his duties as Sheriff. When Johnny Strong was mentioned he would shrug his shoulders and smile whimsically. As the years went by, old Tim Daniels kept the weeds cut from Johnny Strong's grave. It was Tim who had shovelled the dirt back into Johnny's grave, muttering fiercely at the desecration. He wasn't superstitious at all, Tim always said, but after all, he'd been there and seen Johnny's ghost with his own eyes.

And when Bill Ransom said he'd seen a middle-aged couple he'd have sworn was Johnny Strong and Nancy Fletcher, in a little cowtown up in Montana, old Tim squelched him with one contemptuous snort.

For, as everyone knows, Johnny Strong was drowned in a flash flood years ago, when he was on his way to be hanged at the penitentiary. . . .

Colonel Colt's Curtain-Call

By Thomas
Thompson



The Professor rolled and caught the gunman by the ankle....

THE PROFESSOR had come to First Strike as Allton Bettencort, but after one night his name was forgotten in favor of the more appropriate title of "Professor." He had arrived with a theatrical trunk, a pompous dignity, and an abundance of tall tales of a past that was half grease paint and half gunsmoke.

That first night was one to be remembered. The Professor took over Red Tyson's Casino and bought drinks for every man in camp. He recited poetry—sang rollicking songs—and told of how he had

killed Clip Murgard and then given up his guns for good.

Later, when every man had had his fill, the Professor discovered to his amazement that he had no money. For a moment there was silence in the crowded Casino. Then young Red Tyson grinned whimsically, said he guessed the joke was on him, and declared that since it had

To humor the harmless, drunken old Professor, who served as butt of most of the jokes around First Strike, the crowd agreed to let him put on his act. . . . But only that wind-spinning oldster knew the grim life-and-death stake he held in his final performance.

been such a good shindig it was all on the house. It was then that the Professor adopted both Red Tyson and the town of First Strike.

And it wasn't strange that the Professor should attach himself to Red Tyson. Others had before him. Red was young and easy to get along with. Money poured unrestrained into the tills of the Casino, and, as the Professor learned that first night in camp, Red Tyson could say "no" neither to a request for help or a request to cut the cards. So with the help of Tyson's two weaknesses and the shelter of the abandoned jail down the street, the Professor had prospered—until now. Now Red Tyson had suddenly learned to say "no"—and he was saying it like an old hand.

"I don't care if he is your brother," Red snorted. "In the first place this is no place for women. In the second place, why in the devil does he expect *you* to take care of her?"

"It's a long story," the Professor said, and there was nothing in his tone to indicate that this was to be one of his famous windys. "I'm the only relative the girl's got. Besides that, I'm obligated."

"I don't follow you," Red said.

"Well," the Professor said, fumbling for words, "after I killed old man Murgard in that gun fight—"

Red froze. "Now wait a minute," he broke in impatiently. "We were talking about your niece coming out here to visit you. Let's stick to facts."

The Professor looked hurt, but he went on as if he hadn't heard. "My brother started doing pretty well there at home. Like I told all of you, I lost my taste for gun fighting after that battle. A mighty good friend of mine was killed. Then there was all that talk about Murgard's two boys swearing to get my scalp, even if they spent the remainder of their lives doing it. I was afraid I might bring trouble to my brother. I told you how I had my brother change his name to Bettencort. I changed mine at the same time and headed West. Maybe that seems like I was running away—I don't know. But at any rate, the Murgards lost track of our family, and that was the main thing."

"Now look," Red said patiently, "you've told everybody in camp that story a dozen times. I never have said I didn't believe

you, Professor, but if you want me to help you now, let's get back to this letter and not go through all that again. What I want to know is, why is your brother sending his daughter out here to you?"

"All right," the Professor said, taking a deep breath. "I suppose if I want your help I might as well tell you the truth."

The old actor was completely deflated and even his voice lacked the resonance which always made a dramatic utterance of even a simple greeting. "I suppose it's my habit of sort of play acting even when I'm off the stage," he said dismally. "I can't help it. It's kind of your fault. You're young and good looking—own the Casino. Well, you're the sort of man anyone would like to be. Fact is, when I wrote that letter to my brother that night, I guess for a minute I thought I actually was you."

Red Tyson expelled his breath in a long whistle. "So when your brother needed help he turned to his successful brother out West," Red filled in. "That it?"

"I guess that's about it," the Professor admitted, timidly.

Red Tyson shoved himself back from the table. "Looks to me like you got yourself some tall explaining to do when that niece arrives."

THE Professor's voice became frantic. "Wait a minute, Red," he pleaded. "I haven't told you what I want you to do." "There's nothing I can do," Red shrugged. "You got yourself into another mess and it's about time you learn to get out of your own stews. I'm not getting tangled up with any females!"

"But Red," the old man said dramatically. "It's not much I ask. Just enough for some new clothes and a little acting on the part of you boys. It'll only be for a short while. I've already got the badge. Found it at the jail where I sleep."

"Badge?" Red exclaimed. "What in tarnation has that got to do with it?"

"Well," the Professor said, "when I captured old man Murgard I was town marshal. I want you boys to pretend I'm the marshal here. I won't be any trouble, Red," the old man said, warming to his subject. "I'll have her out of town in no time and then I'll move out and you won't have to worry about me. . . ."

"No," said Red firmly. "I won't do it—

it's not the money, Professor—you know that. It's just that all your life you been getting yourself in messes and everybody has been kow-towing to get you out. This time you tromp your own snakes. I'm doing this for your own good, Professor. Wiggle out of it as best you can."

Red got up and went back to the bar. He felt sorry for the old man and at the same time he was convinced that he was doing the right thing. He saw the men at the bar watching him. "Give the boys a drink," he called to the bartender. The unexpected annoyance in his voice made every man turn. "Well?" Red bellowed, "what the devil you starin' at?"

He turned his head to follow the gaze of the men and saw the old Professor rising wearily from the table. The man seemed to have aged twenty years, and he walked toward the door, shaking his head slowly from side to side. Every eye in the room followed him. Big Muck Riordan slammed down his drink and cooked his head to one side unsteadily. "What's the matter, Professor?"

"It's nothing," the Professor said, wiping at the corner of his eye with his knuckles. "Nothing at all, boys. Just go on and have a good time. Don't mind an old man like me. You boys are young. I'm old. It's hard for the old and young to understand each other."

All eyes swung and focused on Tyson. Red stared at his boot toes and shuffled a stack of blue poker chips through his hands.

"You shouldn't be so rough on the Professor," Riordan said, shoving his way toward Red. "The Professor's a good luck piece around here, see."

"Forget it, boys," the Professor said, his voice thin and quavering. "It was nothing, I tell you. I just asked Red to do me a small favor, but it interfered with his plans. I can understand his side of it. It was nothing."

"It must have been something," Big Muck Riordan said. "The Professor don't get upset like that, over nothing."

Red looked at the old man standing forlornly alone in the middle of the floor and had to admit to himself that Allton Bettencort must have been a great actor in his day. Red could see that he was being trapped, and it made him mad.

"Quit play actin', Professor," Red said disgustedly. "I told you I couldn't help you. Now forget it!"

Big Muck Riordan downed a drink and banged on the bar with a heavy fist. "Boys," he said, "I don't know what it was the Professor asked, but I'm here to tell you that whatever it was, Red Tyson can afford to give it to him and so can I. Red is always sayin' he'll cut the cards any time for any stake. All right, I'm callin' him on that!" He looked around the room and saw the eager anticipation on the faces of the men. "Low man gives the Professor what he wants," he said dramatically. "How about it, Red?"

Tyson didn't have much to say in the matter, for Quartz Quigley had already broken the seal on a new deck and was shuffling the cards. Red shrugged disgustedly and drew a card. He glanced at his draw, tossed the card on the table, and poured himself a drink. It was the deuce of clubs. A roar of laughter swept the room and the Professor helped himself to Riordan's drink.

Big Muck drew and turned over a king of spades with a rafter shaking yell. "All right, Red," he bellowed. "You lose. Dig down and give the Professor what he wants. Remember, me and Quartz are here to see that you do it."

A smug grin crawled across Tyson's face. "All right, Big Muck," he said. "Since you and Quartz insisted on cutting yourself in on this deal, I'm glad to have you. You two just elected the Professor, marshal and signed up everybody in this camp to be play-actors for a moon eyed girl."

There was a cold silence in the room. The Professor snatched a bottle from the end of the bar and made tracks out the door.

ALL except one man turned out, the day the weekly stage was to deliver Mary Bettencort. The missing man was the Professor himself. A week previous he had been dispatched to Sacramento with the cash he deemed necessary to outfit himself in a manner becoming his office of marshal. And he had hadn't been heard from since.

It had been a hilarious week, with every man in town entering into the spirit of the

thing and taking it all as the biggest joke that had happened since the night the Professor had fallen through the big mirror at the back of the Chinaman's, while giving a liquor aided interpretation of Hamlet. And now even the memory of that incident made Red mad. It had cost a hundred and sixty dollars to replace that mirror. And mirrors made Red think of San Francisco. And San Francisco made Red think that that was probably exactly where the Professor had wound up.

The sound of the stage laboring up the grade pulled Red's thoughts back to the present. The Concord rounded the bend, and the minute Red got a look at Jerkline Patterson setting there on the box he knew something was up. The old driver's whiskers bristled even more than usual, and he had on a clean shirt and a new hat and he rounded the turn into First Strike without his customary ribald yell. The stage screeched to a stop and the door opened. And then Tyson knew what was wrong.

A girl stepped out. She was eighteen at least—maybe twenty—and she had a face and a figure that no man in the crowd had been able to conjure up even on the loneliest of womanless evenings. Red gulped as he stared at the turned up nose—the wide blue eyes—and the corn colored hair spilling from under a saucy hat. The men stepped back as if recoiling from a hot stove.

Jerkline Patterson enjoyed his dramatic entry for a minute, then spitting over the near wheel he pointed unerringly with his whip butt to Tyson. "Thet there feller can tell you about your Uncle, Miss," he said.

For a second the girl stood in the door of the stage, her eyes studying every man in the crowd. Then she stepped down, a bewildered look on her face, and made her way to Red's side. "I thought my Uncle would be here to meet me," she said, worry tinging her voice.

Red wiped a shaky hand across his chin. "He was detained," he said unsteadily. "He told me to take care of you. . . ." His voice trailed off and he suddenly found that six months without seeing a woman can make a man forget how to talk.

For a full minute they stood there, not saying a word, and every man in the crowd stood slack jawed, staring at the girl. So

intent were they that no one saw the two strangers who rode into town and tied their horses in front of Tarbold's Hotel up the street. When Red recovered his speech he said, "Well, Big Muck, ain't you and Quartz going to take the lady's bags? Come on," he said to Mary, "I'll show you where you can stay." He started to lead the way, decided that was wrong, hesitated, and then practically lost his balance when Mary Bettencort took his arm and fell in step alongside of him.

They went to Tarbold's Hotel and the three men showed Mary to the room on the second floor, which they had arranged for. Red started to leave with the others, badly feeling the need of a drink, but Mary Bettencort motioned for him to stay. Red could feel the perspiration standing out on his forehead as Big Muck and Quartz hurried down the stairs and left him alone. As soon as they were gone the smile left Mary Bettencort's face and her chin tilted. "Where's my Uncle?" she demanded, and there was defiance in her voice.

"Now wait and I'll explain," Red stammered.

The anger left Mary's face as quickly as it had come. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I'm tired." Then her face paled and fear grew in her eyes. "Is anything wrong?" she asked quickly. "The Murgards—?"

"Pshaw!" Red snorted. "There's nothing wrong with your Uncle. And what do you mean—Murgards? Has he been writing you a lot of crazy stuff—getting you all upset?"

She glanced around the room as if to make sure they were alone. Then she said softly, "You are Uncle's friend, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," Red said, puzzled. "Do you think he would have sent me to meet you if I wasn't?"

"I don't know," she said. "Everything is so mixed up. There isn't anyone I can trust." There was sheer desperation in the girl's voice and Red suddenly found himself wishing very much that he could share her trouble, whatever it was.

"What's this all about?" he said softly. "Maybe I can help, if you'll let me."

"No one can help us," she said, and for a minute Red thought that she was not going to tell him any more than that. Then

she clenched her hands and said fiercely, "Uncle was the only man who could stop the Murgards."

Red Tyson gulped. "Murgards?" he said. There was a lot of difference between hearing the name uttered bitterly from the lips of this girl and hearing it in a well colored tale of the Professor's. The name had a harsh, ugly sound.

"Yes, Murgards," Mary said bitterly. "They found out who Dad was. They sent men and burned the store. A lot of people in town lost money and some were hurt. Everyone blamed Dad—said if the Murgards didn't hate our family so, they would have never bothered the town. All our old friends and neighbors turned against us over night. Dad was sick—I couldn't get work any place. . . ." She faltered, and Red saw that the tears which had been bright mist in her eyes were now welling over.

FOR a second Red stood there hating himself for every time he had ever scoffed at the gun tales of the old Professor. Then he hated himself even more as he remembered that he had tried to prevent this girl from coming here. He looked into that upturned face with the single tear coursing down one side of the cute pug nose, and without realizing what he was doing he had taken Mary in his arms and was holding her close. Her soft hair brushed his cheek as he whispered with unaccustomed tenderness, "Don't you worry none. There's nobody going to harm you or your Uncle as long as I'm around."

She pushed herself from his firm embrace, but there was a smile showing through the tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry if I acted silly," she said simply. "I was frightened. I'm not any more."

Red didn't say goodbye. He just squeezed her hand and left the room. There was a strange singing in his ears and he wasn't even conscious of his surroundings until he suddenly realized he was looking down the muzzle of a .45 held in the bony hand of a tall lean stranger. The man's eyes were bright, and the skin was pulled tight over his high cheek bones, making him look like a skeleton. When he spoke, his voice matched his appearance.

"Where's the man who calls himself All-ton Bettencort?" the gunman said.

Red felt a cold chill run up his spine. He thought of the girl in the room and said, "I'm Allton Bettencort."

"If that's so, you got about a minute to live," the stranger said. "I'm Hark Murgard!"

The name fell dully on Red's ears, as if it had come from a great distance. He stood there, fascinated by the bore of the .45. Then Hark Murgard said, "Take care of the girl, Vince. This ain't Bettencort, but we can use him."

A second man stepped from the shadows of the corridor and disappeared into Mary Bettencort's room. Red heard a scream—scuffling—a man's curses—then silence. His muscles ached to reach for Hark Murgard's throat, but the unwavering muzzle of the pistol told him to keep his head. He wouldn't be any good to the girl if he was dead. So he held himself in check, perspiration oozing from every pore of his body.

"All right," Murgard said, "you gonna show us where to find Bettencort or are you gonna be a chump and get yourself killed?"

Red thought fast. Maybe if he could get Hark Murgard out on the street where there was more room. He shrugged his shoulders. "You win," he said. "I'll show you. But let the girl go. She's got nothing to do with it."

"Vince will take care of the girl," Murgard said flatly. "Just in case you have any ideas about yelling for help or double crossing me. Get moving."

When they reached the lobby Red tried one more ruse. "You're overlooking one thing," he said easily. "Suppose the real Allton Bettencort is dead?"

"He ain't," Hark Murgard said. "His niece came out here to see him. That's how we got track of him. No use bluffin', feller. We been waitin' a long time, my brother and me. We're gonna get what we come after."

Red stepped out onto the street. He didn't know which way he should go, so he mentally tossed a coin and decided to go through town. Maybe someone would see that something was wrong, and he'd get help. If not—he'd wait. Sooner or later he'd get a chance to hit that gun aside—swing at that pointed chin.

When Hark Murgard saw the direction

Red was taking, he slipped his gun under his coat and fell into step alongside Red. He nudged Red's ribs with the coat covered gun barrel. "Remember," he said softly. "Double cross me and this gun goes off and the girl gets it too."

"I'll remember," Red said.

THEY were just opposite the Chinaman's restaurant when Hark Murgard spoke again. The tone of his voice made Red freeze.

"Wait a minute," he said. There was almost laughter in his voice. A cruel, cutting laughter that made his words seem macabre. "I don't think we'll have to go any further."

Red turned, hardly daring to look in the direction Hard Murgard was pointing. Then his heart sank. The Professor was sitting on a stool at the far end of the counter, his back to the door.

"Come along," Murgard said, nudging Red with the gun. "You'll want to see this."

Red and Murgard started slowly across the street. Red's feet felt like lead, and every step seemed to jar him to the marrow. He ran his tongue over dry lips. Another ten steps. Then he would yell. He'd get a bullet through his ribs, but maybe the Professor could make a break. Then he thought of the girl. What would happen to the girl? He judged his distance. Two more steps and he'd whirl and swing at Hark Murgard's chin. He glanced at Murgard. The gunman had stopped dead still and was staring into the restaurant wide eyed. Red turned just in time to see the Professor topple from his stool and fall to the floor, as if in a fit.

"Keep going," Murgard said softly. "I don't want him to die before I get to him."

Red Tyson took one look at Allton Bettencort lying on the floor and dropped to his knees beside the old man. The plate of food had fallen from the counter and was spilled on the floor. The Professor's tongue was lolling out of his mouth and his eyes were rolling wildly. He gasped for breath when he tried to talk.

"Those beans," he choked. "Canned beans, Red—poison—my God, man, give me water."

The Chinaman was running wildly behind the counter. Red snatched a pitcher

of water from the Celestial's hands and pressed it to the Professor's lips. The old man gulped feebly, most of the water spilling on the floor.

"My niece," he said weakly. "Is she here?"

"Yes," Red said, "she's here." He looked up into the face of Hark Murgard and saw a cold sneer over the sights of the .45.

"The—gold," the Professor choked. "I'm going, Red. I want her to have it. Tell her about the gold—buried under the floor of the cabin. . . ."

Red saw a quick glint of greed light the eyes of Hark Murgard. The gunman bent forward as if to catch the old man's last words. For a split second he relaxed his grip on the gun in his hand. And in that split second Allton Bettencort rolled and caught the gunman by the ankles.

The old man threw his whole weight against the killer's legs, and Murgard sat down hard. As he hit the floor, Red brought the pitcher down over his head with a smash and followed it up with a crashing right to the jaw. Murgard crumpled and lay still.

The Professor picked himself up from the floor and fastidiously brushed the spilled food and water from the front of his clothes. "That," he said to Red, "was the death scene from one of my greatest achievements. That mirror there on the wall, which you boys so graciously repaired gave me my cue as to when to come on stage." He held up a glittering marshal's badge which had fallen on the floor and pinned it to his figured vest.

But Red wasn't listening to Allton Bettencort's explanation. He was thinking of Vince Murgard, and the scream of terror that had come from Mary Bettencort's room. "Take care of Hark," he called to the Professor. "I'm going after Mary." He had just time to see the blanched look of fear on the Professor's face as he raced out the door and head back toward the hotel.

Red was at the door of Mary's room before he realized that he didn't have a gun. It was too late to turn back now, so he smashed his shoulder against the door and hurled himself into the room.

Vince Murgard's surprise gave Red a

small edge and he lunged at the gunman just as the heavy pistol exploded in his face. He felt the smash of hot lead rack his body, but the force of his weight caught Vince Murgard in the middle and the two men crashed to the floor.

Red tried to lift his right arm and found that it was useless. He brought a heavy boot down on Murgard's fingers and the killer's gun fell to one side. Then Vince was on his feet and his hands were around Red's throat.

Murgard was standing with his back to the window when Red tore himself from the clutching fingers and butted Murgard in the chest with his head. Murgard lost his balance and crashed through the window, but as he did he threw both arms around Red's neck and pulled the young Casino owner through with him onto the steep roof outside.

Red pounded with his left hand, but Murgard was kicking and clawing as they slid down the roof toward the edge. Then Murgard had Red by the legs, and they were both rolling. Red clutched wildly at the edge of the roof, but it was too late. He threw both arms around Murgard's middle as both men rolled off the roof and fell to the hard street below.

There was a jarring, bone cracking jolt as Red hit the ground. White flames danced before his eyes and he started kicking and scratching at the form of Vince Murgard. Then his vision cleared, and he realized that Murgard was not fighting back. The gunman lay still and crumpled.

Red staggered to his feet, and it was Mary Bettencort that put an arm around him when he would have fallen. For one split second he could see her face and the look told him she was glad he was alive. Then her slight strength was not enough to hold him, and he stepped aside and let darkness move in.

WHEN he opened his eyes he was back in the hotel and his right shoulder and forearm were encased in bandages. Mary Bettencort was at his side, her small hand caressing his forehead. When she saw that he was awake she withdrew quickly, and Red was sorry that he had opened his eyes. Big Muck Riordan and Quartz Quigley were there, too, and in the back-

ground was a brand-new Allton Bettencort.

The old man's beard was white and trimmed. A wide brimmed, black hat sat rakishly on his white hair and a black shoestring tie was looped neatly at his throat. On his new broadcloth coat was the glittering Marshal's shield.

"Ah, my boy!" the Professor said, stepping forward. "I knew you'd come around! It's like I told my dear niece, here. I never worried about you for a minute."

Red tried to raise himself from his pillow, but Mary pushed him gently back.

"You rest," she said softly. "You have nothing to worry about. Uncle is taking care of everything."

Red felt his brows knit in puzzlement, and he looked to Big Muck for help. Big Muck and Quartz jerked a thumb toward the Professor and shrugged hopelessly.

"I think it's wonderful that Uncle has decided to retire and devote all his time to being Marshal," Mary Bettencort said. "And I do hope you'll have a lot of success with the Casino."

"I'll have a lot of success with the Casino?" Red said weakly.

"Don't worry, my boy," the Professor broke in quickly, "don't worry a particle. It was the least I could do for you—giving you the place. It's a good business, and if you treat it well, it will treat you well." He coughed slightly, polished his badge with his coat sleeve, and said pompously, "Let's get out of here. Can't you see that these two young people want to be alone?"

Mary Bettencort blushed as the three men left the room. "You mustn't mind Uncle," she said, looking at Red. "He's like all other stage people. Just says the first thing that comes into his mind." She was silent a moment, then she said dreamily. "He is a dear. He used to be a great actor."

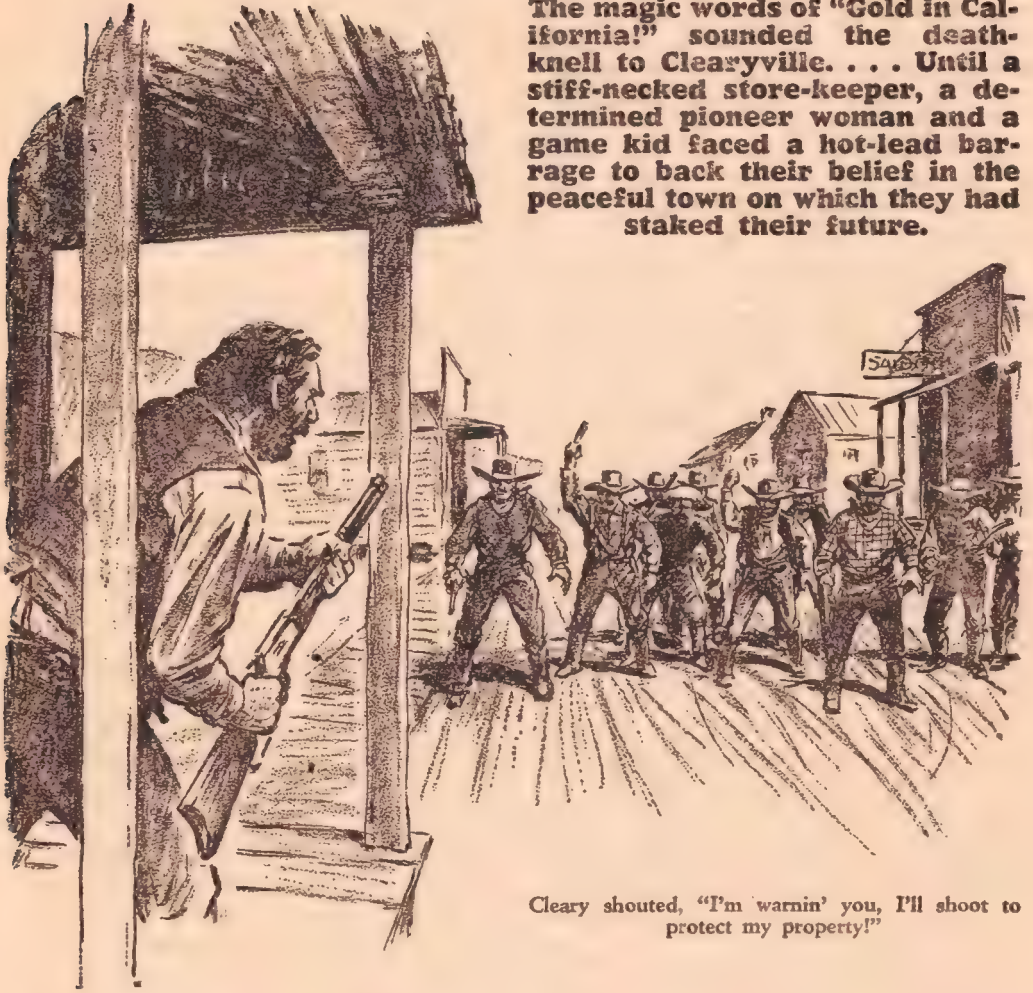
Red Tyson looked at the proud back of Marshal Allton Bettencort going out the door. Quickly he thought of the reward that must be coming on the Murgards. Then he started thinking that First Strike could afford to pay a Marshal—

"Did you say your Uncle 'used to be a great actor'?" Red chuckled. He raised his good arm and scratched his head. "Believe me, Miss," he said firmly, "your Uncle still does all right!"

New Blood for a Ghost-Town

By Giff Cheshire

The magic words of "Gold in California!" sounded the death-knell to Clearyville. . . . Until a stiff-necked store-keeper, a determined pioneer woman and a game kid faced a hot-lead barrage to back their belief in the peaceful town on which they had staked their future.



Cleary shouted, "I'm warnin' you, I'll shoot to protect my property!"

YOUNG Roger Cleary was deeply content, as he cut around the bend and let the white mare slope out on the last stretch to Clearyville. Mild, mellow sunshine lay its golden wash over the broad dales and low rolling hills of the settlement. As far as he could see there was clear evidence of the rich harvest that was at hand, the first real harvest Clearyville had ever had.

At the north edge of the village, Roger turned the mare from the main road and headed toward the barn behind the small

frame store building. He put up the horse, then his long legs carried him swiftly to the door of the living quarters behind the store. He moved with an easy confidence well beyond his twenty years. It was good, he reflected, to be permanently settled at last in a land of so much promise. It was good for him, but it was better yet for Nan Cleary, his mother, who had grown too old for the vagabond life Big Dan Cleary had given her. It was good that age had at last slowed Dan Cleary to the point that he was willing to give up his big dreams and

settle down here and run the general store.

The spicy odors of baking struck Roger's nostrils as he stepped through the kitchen door. His mother, a portly woman with white hair and a wrinkled, kindly face, smiled a greeting. Roger kissed her affectionately, and was on the point of helping himself to one of the raised doughnuts she was frying when his long body stiffened.

Excited voices came through the doorway leading to the store. It was the pitch of the voice that arrested him, the high tremulousness that tightens men's throats at moments of intensity.

He heard Hen Ghent say: "I heard him myself! This 'jammer skipper kept a button on his lip while he went around buying up every pick, gold pan and shovel in Vancouver. He cleaned out Portland and Oregon City. And he was buying all the flour and whiskey and coffee he could lay hand on. When he'd stripped everything slick as a whistle he showed his sack of dust. He says, 'Boys, the hills of California're made of this stuff!'"

"Criminy!" somebody breathed.

For a long time Roger did not understand the tremor that went through him, his sudden sense of foreboding. He pushed through the doorway, standing unnoticed for a moment at the end of the shelving.

Dan Cleary stood behind the counter, his big arms spread wide as he leaned upon it, his mouth ajar as he stared at Hen Ghent. Roger saw the look in his face, the look that came when he was about to take the Clearys on another wild goose chase. The same look was in the eyes of the half dozen others who formed a tight, fascinating circle around Ghent.

"The windjammer's sailed, and that smart skipper's got a gold mine all his own in that stuff he's corralled," Ghent resumed. "The big strike was around Sutter's Mill, a feller told me, and on the Sacramento. Man, they'll be pouring into California like the flies go after your molasses barrel, Dan! Yes, sir, he's got a good thing."

IT WAS big Dan who made the first move. He looked at his old checker cronie for a moment, then he took the soiled white apron off and flung it in contempt across the counter. His eyes were aflame. "Hen, what're we waitin' for?"

Then his eyes met those of his son.

Not knowing just why he felt the violent surge of anger against the man, Roger looked at Hen Ghent. "Where'd you get that cock-and-bull story, Hen?"

"Oregon City. I just got back from there, and the town's on fire! California's so full of gold a man can dig it with his jackknife! Your Pa and me's going!"

"Yeah, and me, too!" another spoke up.

"But the crops!" Roger gasped. "They're ready to harvest!"

"To hell with the crops! To hell with the harvest! Who's gonna sweat for oats when he can have nuggets for half the work?"

The cold knot that had been forming in the pit of Roger's stomach tightened. It was his first experience with gold fever, running in epidemic form, though he had seen it paralleled all too often in his father.

Roger looked around the gallery of wrapt faces, his eyes wide with disbelief. "You can't mean it!" he gasped. "All your work—your plans—all the things you've starved and frozen and sweated for! They're here, now, right at hand! At church Sunday, Hen, you offered thanks for our first real harvest!"

"That," Ghent returned, with a grin, "was before we knew they'd struck it big in California!"

Roger knew then that it was an overwhelming thing that had hit Clearyville, that none of these men were any more able to withstand it than Dan Cleary had ever been. Roger could not understand it. To him the challenge of the rainbow that had risen suddenly above the Siskiyou, separating the Oregon Country from California, had only sinister meaning. This rainbow meant violence and heartbreak. Who knew that better than Nan Cleary and himself?

Hen Ghent was tromping about the store, eyeing shovels, contemplating the shelves of canned goods and dried vegetables and work clothing. "Get a wiggle on, Dan!" he roared. "I'm going to be the first man you outfit for the new diggings!"

"Not so fast, Hen!" The fire of speculation had kindled in Dan Cleary's eyes. "If the downriver towns're cleaned out aready, I reckon I got something right here. You can have your outfit, Hen, so can anybody else with the cash. But it's going to cost you plenty!"

Roger's voice cut in, cold with anger. "There ain't a nickel's worth of stuff for sale!"

Anger burned abruptly in the elder Cleary's eyes. Forgotten now were the years in which he had been lazily content to let Roger do the work and take the responsibility of the store and the fact that but for his son's natural business head this fine, complete stock would never have been built up. Dan Cleary was taking charge again, with his old flair for the flamboyant.

For a long moment he looked at his son, his expression gradually softening. "Reckon I give you better training than I realized, boy! You're right. This stock'll be worth ten times as much in California as it's worth here. Boys, we're nailing the door shut! We're moving our stuff to California, Roger and me, lock, stock and barrel!"

Hen Ghent whirled on him with instant temper. "What a fine neighbor you turned out to be! You've got what's probably the only complete stock of merchandise left in the Willamette Valley! And none of us can move without supplies. You could help your neighbors get a big advantage in the rush! And you hold us up!" There was an angry muttering of approval of this remark from the others in the store.

Dan Cleary only grinned. It was not often that fortune dumped such an opportunity in a man's lap. He watched them file from the store, hostility stamped on their faces. He winked at his son.

IN STONY silence Roger watched the proceedings. He well realized that this was not the end of the argument. For the moment he did not try to correct his father's impression of his motive in objecting to their outfitting. He was staggered at the transformation that had so abruptly come over the little community. A plague of gold had struck!

None of the farmers, who had wintered several years on Cleary credit, had money to outfit themselves and make the long trek through the Siskiyou. None of them had thought of that, with the same unbelievable reasoning with which they had mentally abandoned the big crops they had worked for years to realize.

Cursing the skipper who had brought

the word to Portland, Roger looked at his father. "We ain't going to California."

"What you talking about?"

"We ain't throwing up everything to rush off on a wild goose chase again! This is the first time we've ever had solid ground under our feet! And we're sticking here!"

With a laugh, Dan Cleary bit off a chew of plug cut. "And who'll be our customers—the gophers? Boy, in a month there won't be a able-bodied man left in the valley. Don't be a danged fool. This country's finished. Here this stuff won't be worth a plugged peso. In California, it'll bring a fortune. It's as good as gold, and when it's sold we can find some gold to dig outta the ground!"

Roger was aware that his mother was standing in the doorway and must have been within earshot long enough to have heard the developments. He turned to her hopefully. She was the only one on earth that Dan Cleary might listen to. Roger knew the fear that must have been kindled in her heart, the swift and unexpected rebirth of the old despair of ever settling down.

"You talk to him, Ma!" Roger said, with a shrug. "Tell him you ain't gonna spend your old age rattlin' off with him to wherever it strikes his fancy to go! He won't pay no attention to me."

Quick distress showed in Nan Cleary's eyes, as a lifetime of loyalty to her man took issue with her own desires and her feeling for her son. Roger was well aware that her own welfare would take little part in the struggle.

Dan Cleary grinned, the old twinkling grin that must have won her heart when she was a girl. "Get your bonnet on, Ma! Pack your kettles and our soogans! I'll buy you them diamonds I promised you when you were a blushing bride!"

"Tell him we've got to stay, Ma!" Roger begged. "Tell him you're both too old to go trappin' off again!"

"No, son." Only Roger could guess what her words cost her. "If Pa wants to go, I'm ready."

Roger turned and plunged blindly from the store. He made his way instinctively down Missionary Road, then turned from it to the isolated little spot on Injun Creek where he often went to sit alone and dream. But this was the end of dreams. The shrewd

business mind working under his turbulent emotions told him his father had been right when he said that Clearyville and its environs would be stripped of settlers. Probably the whole Willamette Valley would be. The ripe harvest would stand there to burn up under the summer sun. The buildings would begin to fall apart. And time would wash over the valley and soon Clearyville would be but a memory.

IN A matter of days two more schooners sailed up the river to Oregon City to confirm the story brought in earlier. There was no doubt now about the big strike at Sutter's Mill. The captains fine-combed the towns, already picked clean. Hearing of merchandise still intact in Clearyville, one enterprising soul hired a horse and rode up to see Dan Cleary.

Cleary listened to his pleadings in amusement, enjoying his newly acquired bargaining power. In the end he turned the trading captain down flat.

"If it's worth that much to you, it's worth a heap more to me!"

"I wonder if you know you're settin' on a powder keg, friend?" the seaman said darkly. "There's feelin' running against you, hereabouts. I been talking to the men over in the saloon. I'll pay you a good price. If you're smart, you'll let me take the stuff off your hands."

With a sudden jut of the jaw, Dan Cleary snapped back, "Nothin' this side of hell's ever scared me out yet, mister!"

Roger Cleary listened to this in mounting wonder. In the winking of an eye, almost, their merchandise had turned to a form of gold itself, and he disliked the thought. If a man was starving, there might be sense in his selling his soul to the devil for a meal but the men in Clearyville settlement, the skipper and Dan Cleary, were all well fed. Yet anyone of them would be willing to spill his blood to get control of that stock of food, clothes and hardware.

The fever that had been running in Clearyville raged after the captain's visit. The last doubting Thomas was persuaded that riches for everyone lay across the Siskiyou. Dan Cleary padlocked his door and went to work on the big wagon that had brought them across the great plains and now was to take them down the immi-

grant trail through Southern Oregon. Deputations came to argue and threaten, but he only laughed and dismissed them with a wave of the hand.

Though he lent himself sullenly to his father's bidding, Roger was far from reconciled to the situation. If the riffraff that hung out in Knute Browder's saloon down the street cleared out, the settlement would be better off, but he was shocked to discover that such sober-minded men as Hen Ghent, Sid McPhee and Tom Holman had the fever as bad as the rest.

More and more Browder's saloon became gold strike headquarters, and even Ghent and his intimates spent most of their time there in ceaseless talk and planning. The afternoon after the captain's visit, and without knowing exactly why, Roger stopped in there. He was aghast at the hostility that leaped in to the eyes that turned toward him.

A beefy, florid man with a gravelly voice, Knute Browder, fixed Roger with a stare. "Well, kid, your pa still set on double-crossin' his neighbors?"

In angry defense, spun out of loyalty, Roger snapped back, "He ain't double-crossin' nobody, Browder! I've got a fancy picture of how generous you'd be, if you had the same chance!"

Browder scowled. "Gettin' lippy, now that you think you Clearys're top dogs, ain't you? This settlement's always operated under the committee system, until the States takes us in as a territory. And we've formed a new committee, dealing you high-handed Clearys out!"

"So what?" Roger demanded, family feeling compelling him to defend his name.

"So we figger you're unlawfully blockin' the good of the settlement. You come in here just in time to hear the committee's demands. Which is that you release those supplies to us at a fair price. If not . . ." He shrugged.

"If not, what?"

"We're coming to take 'em!"

ROGER looked around him, studying the stony faces. Hen Ghent, who long had been one of his father's best friends, stared at him stonily, absently nodding agreement to what Browder had threatened. McPhee and Holman, standing together, hooked thumbs into their belts, their

eyes adamant. A couple of unsavory characters, by the pot-bellied stove, idly brushed palms against the butts of their sixguns in insolent insinuation.

There was no fear in the feeling that welled up in Roger. "You fools! You danged, knot-headed fools! Sure, they must've found gold in California. It must've been a big strike to set the whole coast on fire this way! I ain't denying that. But do you think every man jack as joins the stampede's going to come-outta it a rich man? I reckon I should know something about that! For every man that hits it, a hundred tear their hearts out! And it don't do them as finds it any good!"

It went around the room like the start of a big fire, first a laugh, joining to others until it pinched up into a roar of derision, in which men slapped their thighs and each other's shoulders and doubled up.

It stung Roger far worse than a physical attack could have. He stood there staring at them, a stain spreading on his cheeks. Then he wheeled toward the door.

"Tell your pa!" Knute Browder roared after him. "Tell him what the committee's decided! Tell him we give him until five o'clock to answer!"

Roger spun in the doorway. "You can have your answer now! The Cleary store ain't outfittin' any gold rush! If you think different, come and get it!"

"We'll come!"

Roger stumbled down the street, and his heels pounded across the board walk fronting the store. Dan Cleary looked up from the pine board box he was packing with tinned goods when his son burst through the door. Roger told him of the threat.

Dan Cleary's back straightened. "Boy, I'm proud of you! Let 'em try!"

Roger hurried to the kitchen, where his

mother was busy at her oft repeated task of packing the cooking utensils. "Ma, take the mare and ride for Marie Ghents! At least the women ain't gone crazy yet, and you'll be safe there!"

There was a placid smile on the woman's lips. "No, son, I reckon I'll just get on with my packing."

They came at once, not wanting to give the Clearys a chance to fort up. Watching from a front window, Roger saw them leave Browder's saloon in a group and start down the street. Many of them were armed. Big Knute Browder stalked ahead of them, flanked by a pair of his cronies.

Dan Cleary jacked a shell into the rifle he clutched in his hands. His lips were peeled in a grin, and the light of battle shone in his staring eyes. He stepped through the door onto the porch.

Cleary lifted his voice. "Some among you I counted as neighbors and friends!" he roared. "So I'm warnin' you, I'll shoot to protect my property!"

There was a long moment's silence, then a figure moved, and a rock sailed through the air, thudding against the siding behind Dan. Cleary whirled and ducked through the door. He had sounded his warning, got back a challenge.

At a word from Browder the attacking group broke up, men bending and scurrying off in two directions.

Dan Cleary frowned. "They know they's only two of us, or three, countin' Ma. We can defend only three sides at the most. They's enough of them to break up into four bunches, any one of which'd outnumber us. But, boy, we'll give 'em a scrap."

AN EXCITEMENT such as he had never known before was leaping in Roger's veins. The fury that had mounted

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when they had laughed at him still endured. But he did not like this. It was the presence of Browder and his handful of intimates that worried him. They were treacherous and ruthless men.

And it must have been that element that started the shooting. A volley of rocks came first, crashing out window panes on two sides of the building. Dan Cleary held his fire, as if he, too, was reluctant to open up against his erstwhile friends. He heard the crash of glass without resorting to gunfire, then abruptly a series of guncracks sounded from across the street.

With a curse Dan Cleary spun, and Roger saw the stain of blood that appeared on one temple, from a bullet that grazed his head. Another volley followed, with lead taking out the last of the glass in the front window. Both men lurched out of range.

"Treachery!" Dan grated. "They had a squad already posted on the roof of the blacksmith shop to get elevation!"

That removed the last reluctance from either man. It was now a battle for survival, whether they wanted it or not, a battle touched off by unreasoning human lust. With a cold shudder Roger drew a bead on a figure flitting through the locusts beyond the street and squeezed the trigger.

For twenty minutes the battle fury mounted. Though gunfire sounded on every side, rocks continued to pelt the pine siding of the building. Dan sent Roger to the living quarters to try to watch those two sides, while he himself undertook to defend the other two. "They dassn't try to burn us out!" Dan meditated, "for they'd burn the goods they're fighting for. They'll have to keep it up until they pick us off."

It was a cheerless prospect, and Roger's mind now was too chilled to meditate upon its foolhardiness. But the Clearys no longer had a choice in the matter. He sent his mother into an inner room, where she would be as far as possible from harm.

For another ten minutes the thunder of exploding gunpowder rocked Clearyville. Suddenly a ripping oath came from Dan. Roger jerked erect, not daring to leave his post, where he was catching it hot and heavy from four men holed up in the big rocks on the bank of Injun Creek. Dan must have been hit, and hard.

Then he heard Dan roar again. "Ma!

Get back! Stay back, I tell you!" There was a sound like a groan, and Roger rushed to the storeroom.

Dan Cleary's shoulder was stained with blood, showing where he had just been hit. But he was paying no attention to that. At his feet lay Nan Cleary.

Roger realized what had happened. Hearing Dan's groan, she had started to him, and, unaware of the squad on the blacksmith shop roof, had run past the big front window. A stain was growing on her shoulder, yet her features were strangely reposed, and Roger did not know if she still lived.

Dan had forgotten the enemies beyond the walls. For an awful moment he looked down at the heap at his feet, and it was all epitomized there, the woman who had served him through thick and thin with no thought of herself. Then he was on his knees beside her.

"Nan! What've they done to you?"

After an awful moment he staggered to his feet. Roger stood transfixed while his father lurched through the door and onto the porch, disdaining the gunfire. Then Dan Cleary's voice sounded above the detonation.

"Hold you fire, men! Hold it, I say! I wanta talk to you!"

Except for a few scattered shots, the firing ceased abruptly.

Knute Browder's voice boomed back. "You and that kid of yours come out with your hands up!"

Dan ignored him. "Hen—Hen Ghent! And you, Sid and Tom! It's you I want to talk to! Nan's been hit! Call off your pack! You can have the stock—you can have everything I've got—only let me get out to bring a doctor for her!"

THERE was an instant's silence, then Browder's voice came again, addressed to his own faction. "It's a trick, boys! Don't take any chances! Get him while we got the chance!"

"No more of your treacherous tricks, Browder!" Hen Ghent's voice sang out. "Dan Cleary never did no trickin' in his life! And we ain't got no quarrel with Nan Cleary!"

A shot rang out, and Dan Cleary weaved on his feet as the slug whipped past him.

"Damn you for a yellow dog, Brow-

der!" Hen Ghent shouted. "Come on, boys, we're going to help that woman!"

Ghent emerged from a thicket between the saloon and blacksmith shop. Several others followed him, men whom the Clearys had once counted among their friends. Knute Browder roared again: "Stop 'em, boys! I see the play! They're fixing to deal us out! If that's the case, we'll just pick that stock off for ourselves!"

Ghent's group came across the open on a dead run and one of them went down under the hail of Browder's lead. The others scurried into the bullet splintered store.

Roger was bending over his mother. "Hit in the chest," he reported, his voice tight. "Can't tell if it touched her lungs!"

Hen Ghent's face was white as he looked down. "I mind the time," he said softly, "when she set up night after night with my Marie."

"And my Buelah, the night little Annie was born!"

Hen Ghent turned stricken eyes to Dan Cleary. "It was Browder's men who did the shooting. Us boys pitched our rocks, but that was all. Honest, Dan! But, mister, if you'll break out some of them guns you've got in your stock, we'll send them polecats apackin'! We've got to get help for Nan!"

But Sid McPhee and Tom Holman and the four others who had come with them were already helping themselves to the

firearms in a still unsealed packing case and stuffing them with cartridges. . . .

It was morning before the doctor, hastily summoned from Oregon City after Browder's bunch had been driven off, reported that Nan would live. Many a man never left the shattered store that night, and those that did, to tend chores, were back shortly.

Dan gave them the news, his drawn face suddenly luminous. After the good word had been passed and hands shaken all around, Dan said, "The stock's all yours, men. Outfit yourselves and be on your way to California."

Hen Ghent drew himself erect. He could not put it into words, but it was all there in his eyes. The fever that had hit the settlement had turned neighbor against neighbor, father against son, husband against wife. He wanted no more of it.

"What you talkin' about, Dan!" he blurted. "We'll need that stock here in Clearyville, next winter!"

And a dozen other heads nodded.

Sitting by his mother's bed, Roger heard it all and a quiet happiness filled him. He slipped from the room a little later when his father came in, but even from the kitchen he heard Dan say, "Nanny, girl, I reckon I ain't ever goin' to give you them diamonds I promised you when we were married."

And after a moment, his mother said, "Diamonds, Dan? I've got something far more precious than diamonds!"



South of the Border, North of Hell

Sam Carver reckoned being a Texan was just about all there was for a man to be proud of in the badly bent helltown of San Alvaro—and proved it the night his lightning guns toyed with treason to turn back a wagon train headed for hell!

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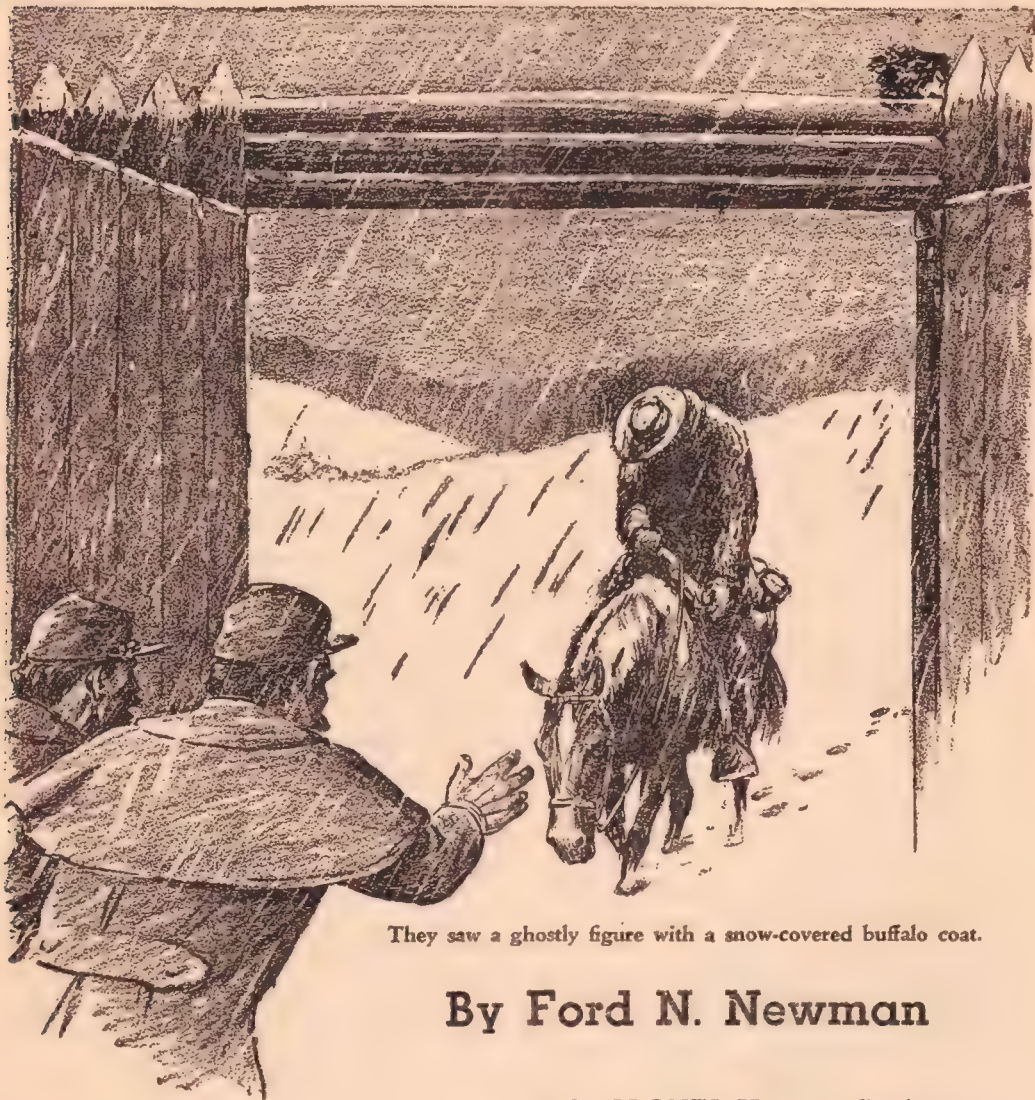
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Message to Fort Laramie



They saw a ghostly figure with a snow-covered buffalo coat.

By Ford N. Newman

The lives of every man and woman in that besieged outpost depended on a buckskin scout—whom not one frontiersman would trust with a plugged peso!

COLONEL Henry B. Carrington, the young commander of Fort Kearny, stopped his ceaseless pacing long enough to open the door of the stockade hospital; his usually cherubic features were drawn and haggard as he watched the valiant half frozen men come straggling in to the warmth of the small fire.

When the weary little band had all filed in, Carrington braced himself and stepped into the flickering light of the fire.

"Attention men," he said tightly.

The men shuffled uneasily and halted.

"I want a volunteer, to ride to Fort Laramie for help."

The dejected faces of the men grew utterly blank in the silence that followed the request. Then suddenly, a black bearded man with narrow, hard eyes, stepped forward, blowing on his frozen fingers.

"I'll go Sir," he said quietly.

That man was John "Portugee" Phillips, a civilian scout.

Then Fisher, another civilian scout stepped up.

"I'll go with you, Portugee."

Phillips face lighted up for a moment, then became grim. "No, Fisher," he said. "I'll make it alone. You're needed here."

Carrington led Phillips and Fisher outside.

"Fisher," he ordered, "Get my horse!"

When Fisher had clumped away on his frozen feet, Carrington turned to Phillips. "Phillips," he said quietly, "There's only one chance in a thousand that you'll make it."

Phillips nodded.

"But," Carrington continued, "The life of every man and woman here depends on you. You've got to make it!"

Phillips nodded again. "I will," he said grimly.

Fisher returned with the Colonel's own Kentucky thoroughbred and saddle. He handed Phillips a sack of oats.

Phillips shook hands with Carrington and Fisher and started on one of the most outstanding rides in the annals of America. The run from Marathon was a holiday compared to it.

THE day before—Friday, December 21st—the wood train had left Fort Kearny in the early morning; a bright clear day but bitterly cold. And then about 11 o'clock came the signal from Pilot Butte, that the wood train had been attacked. Colonel Carrington had ordered Captain Fetterman and Lieutenant Grummond, with eighty picked men to go to their aid.

However, he had not reckoned with the fierce Sioux chief Red Cloud. Over the next hill, the wily chief had closed the jaws of the bloody trap upon them.

East, west, north and south, in every draw and behind every butte were the Cheyennes and Sioux!

Back at the Fort they had heard the firing.

The infantry, Fetterman and Grummond among them had gone down in a mass of Indians. The Indians had few guns but hatchets, clubs, and spears had been enough. Before long the cavalry had been wiped out too.

Colonel Carrington ordered Captain Ten Eyck, and a trooper to ride out and find out what was happening. They came back close to their horses' necks. They had seen more than 2,000 Indians galloping away down the valley below. They had also found Fetterman and Grummond and their forty-seven infantrymen in a little space not more than forty square feet. All the bodies had been scalped and mutilated. And a little farther on had been the cavalrymen scattered along the ridge.

And now, with Fort Laramie two hundred and thirty-six miles to the south and the nearest telegraph station, Horse Shoe Creek only forty miles north of Laramie, their only hope lay in the daring ride of Portugee Phillips.

At first Phillips walked in the careening darkness, painfully on the alert, with a roaring deafness in his ears, and a million tiny icy fingers plucking at him. Then, well away from the Fort, he mounted and began his endless gallop through whirling snow and darkness.

On Christmas Eve the Kentucky thoroughbred stumbled into Laramie with a frozen ghost astride him.

Two hundred and thirty-six miles north the sentries at Kearny still manned the stockade, frozen apparitions, and the rest of the garrison shoveled, but Kearny was saved. Phillips, however, lay between life and death for weeks.

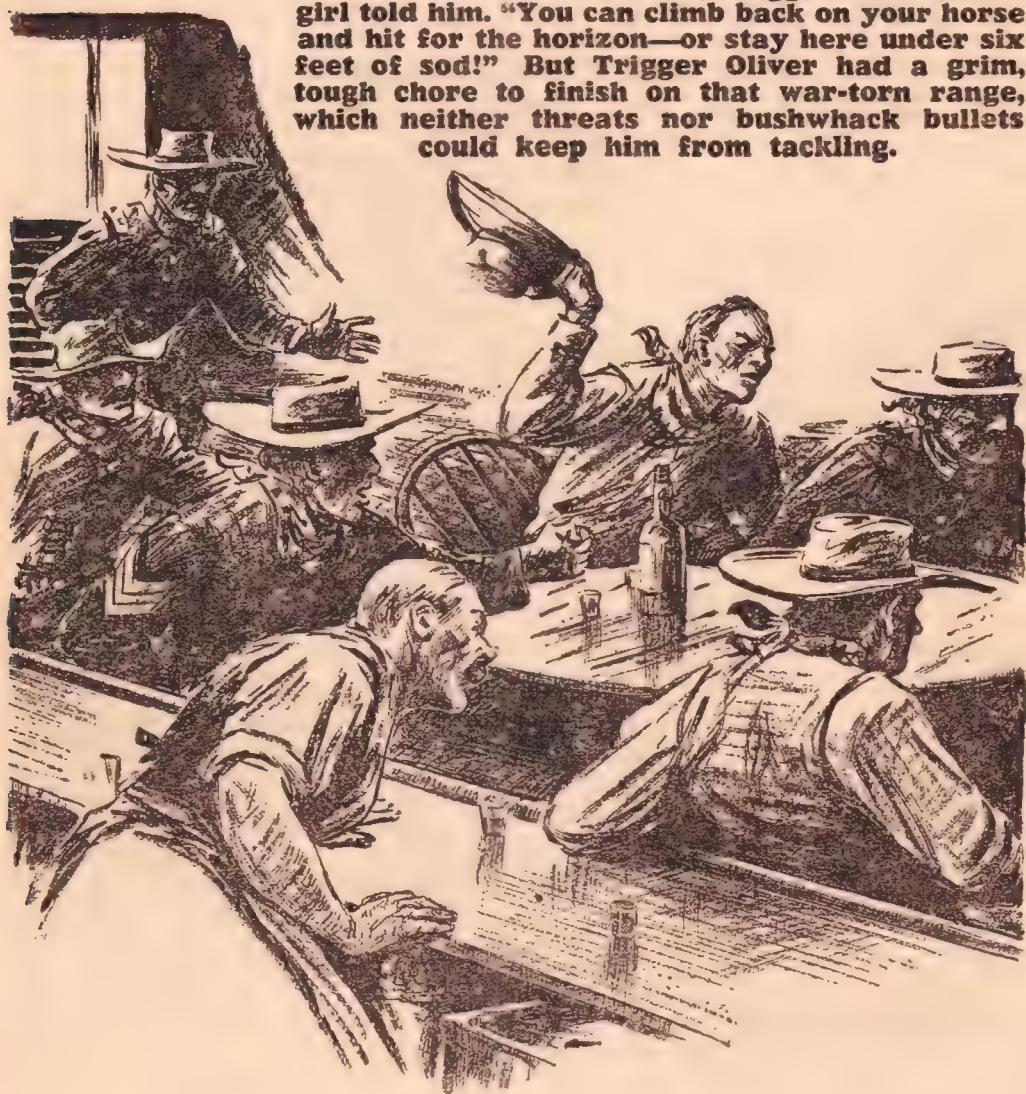
How Phillips found his way has ever since been a marvel to the West.

It is pleasant to record that a grateful Government presented Portugee Phillips with three hundred dollars for his scouting services, including his ride.

A few years before his famous ride, Phillips was considered quarrelsome and not to be trusted. However his true character came to light that day Colonel Carrington asked for a volunteer. For that famed ride Portugee Phillips will long be remembered as a true son of the West.

Trigger Oliver--Death's

"We've no room for killers, Trigger Oliver," the girl told him. "You can climb back on your horse and hit for the horizon—or stay here under six feet of sod!" But Trigger Oliver had a grim, tough chore to finish on that war-torn range, which neither threats nor bushwhack bullets could keep him from tackling.



CHAPTER ONE

A Colt Welcome

SLADE OLIVER pulled rein and looked at the river. It sparkled in the sunlight like a diamond studded ribbon. He could smell the clean and fresh water. He knew his Mashed O herd, a quarter of a mile behind him, smelled it too. Their bawling had taken on a new

note and they were moving up very fast.

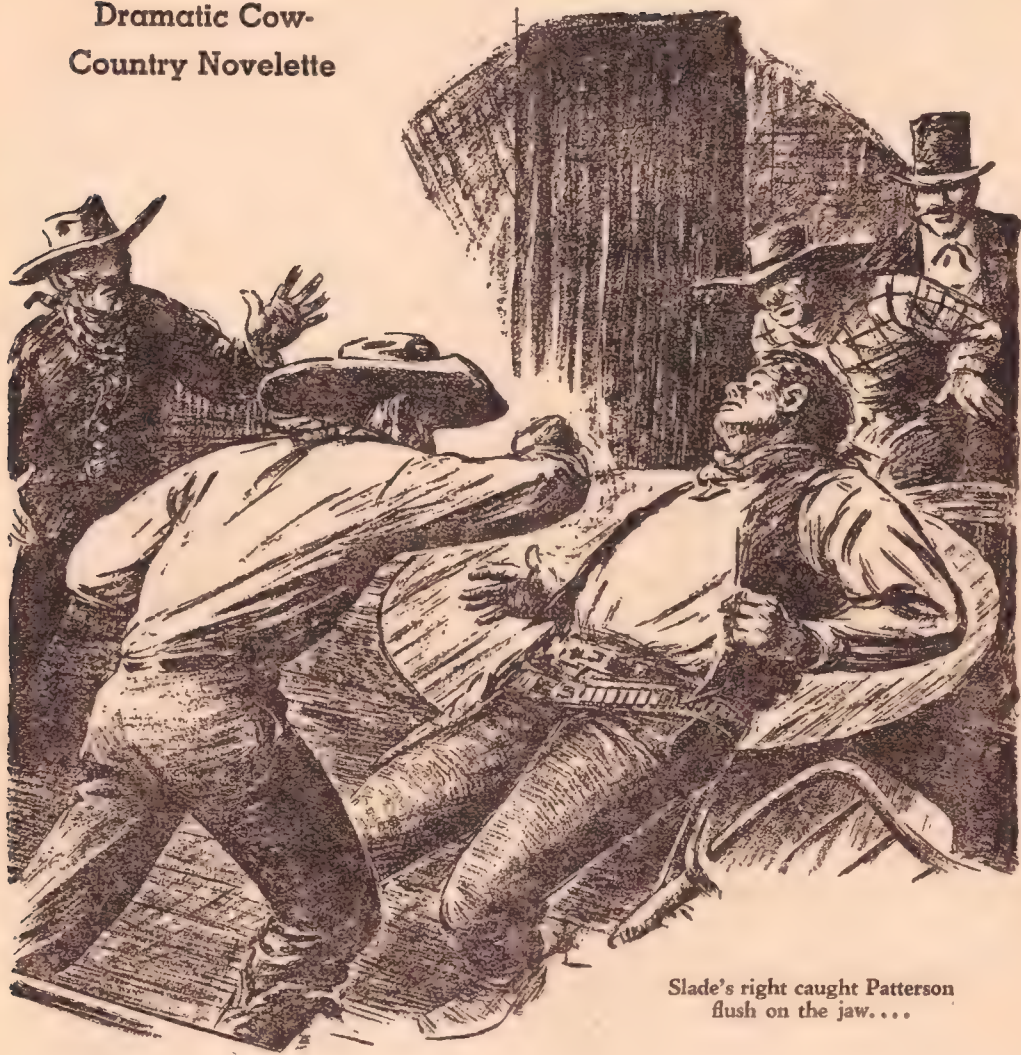
Slade swore. For between him and the rippling stream was a shining, new three strand barbed wire fence!

As far as he could see it ran on and on. Right to the end of Tom Fisher's lease, he knew, which would be many more weary miles for his herd to travel before making camp. Miles that couldn't be made tonight. And those thirsty animals, coming on at a run now, would be crazed enough at

Strawboss

By Ennen
Reaves Hall

Dramatic Cow-
Country Novelette



Slade's right caught Patterson
flush on the jaw...

the sight of that water, to cut themselves to ribbons against that vicious fence.

Slade reached into his saddle pocket for his wire nippers, and reached for the first bright strand of wire. But he never touched it. A voice stopped him. It seemed to come right out of a willow thicket. And, of all things, it was the melodious voice of a woman!

"Don't touch it!" the soft voice said. "Don't touch it unless you want a hole

put right through the center of your heart!"

He saw her then, partly screened by the lacy fronds of the willows. Just a slip of a girl, no higher than a man's shoulder. The Colt she held, was pointed steadily at Slade as she repeated her warning.

"Get back from that fence, Trigger Oliver! One more step and I'll shoot. Get back on your horse and keep riding!"

The laugh that had started in Slade's throat died quickly. This was no laughing

matter. This was trouble again! And Slade felt too tired to cope with trouble just then.

"You seem to know me, Ma'am." His voice was like cut steel. "That being the case you ought to know that Slade Oliver don't take orders from anybody. I'm cutting this fence so my cattle can get water they're needing bad. And then I'm driving them on through to my lease, ten miles due west."

"That's where you're wrong!" Her voice had become strained. "You're not setting foot on our range. Tom Fisher has his fences up and they're staying up!"

The little patience Slade had, deserted him. "Are you crazy?" he exploded. "It must be twenty miles around and another twenty to a safe river crossing. And my critters have had no water all day!"

"You should have thought of that when you bought that lease," she replied, coolly. "You knew you'd have to cross the Fisher range to get to yours, if you drove up from Texas."

"But, great Scot, Tom Fisher didn't have a fence four months ago when I got that lease from the Cheyennes. It never occurred to me I couldn't drive across . . ."

"You're finding out," she interrupted. "Now you can either go around or go back to Texas where you belong!"

DEEP inside him anger flared into a fierce flame, but Slade controlled it with an effort. Used to all kinds of trouble, this was a new situation for him. If the girl defying him had been a man—any man—he could think of a lot of things to do. But a woman! How in hell did a man go about besting a stubborn girl without hurting her? Fighting women just wasn't in Slade Oliver's code. Knowing nothing else to do he tried some more reasoning on her.

"If you're thinking I got no right in the Territory, Ma'am, you're wrong. I've leased grazing land from the Injuns, same's Tom Fisher and others. All I'm wanting is to get my herd onto home ground and you know this fording here is the only place for miles where the river bank is low enough to drive cattle over."

"I also know the river is on Fisher land," she said, crisply. "And we all know that if you cross our range with your herd you'll

pick up half our beef. We know all about you, Trigger Oliver. The ranchers and feeders know that nothing's going to be safe any more with you in here. And you're not crossing Fisher land!"

She sounded like she meant it, all right. Slade thumb-prodded his dust coated Stetson back off his forehead and thought swiftly. This must be Tom Fisher's girl. He knew about Fisher, a government contract buyer who kept the Indians supplied with their beef rations. Fisher was said to be a hard driving man, but respected by both Indians and whites. If he were here he could probably be reasoned with. But he'd evidently given orders that Slade and his Texas cattle were not to go through. And the girl was going to stand pat.

Slade's steel gray eyes narrowed as he studied her hurriedly. She was dressed like a boy, wearing levis and flannel shirt. She handled her gun like a man and plainly enough she meant to act like a man. Then why not treat her like a man? She was asking for it.

He set his lips stubbornly and determination rose in him. He'd gone through a lot to get that herd this far; they were tired and gaunted to the bone. They couldn't go another twenty miles without water. He didn't intend to make them. Slade Oliver could be hard headed, too!

He took a tentative step forward. The gun in the girl's hand roared and dust spurted up right at his feet. And there was no sign of weakening or backing down in her angry voice as she cried, "The next one you'll feel, Trigger Oliver! Get back on your horse and start riding!"

Anger seemed to turn Slade's blood into ice. The persistent use of the name he hated, as much as the closeness of that bullet, infuriated him. But he merely shrugged and said, mockingly, "You win, lady—this time."

He mounted, careful to keep his hands in plain sight. But he still held the nippers and the instant his leg forked the saddle he let fly with them, straight for the booted ankles of the girl.

She shot again, as he thought she would. But she also ducked, involuntarily, which was what he'd counted on. The shot went wild and before she could squeeze the trigger again, Slade's lariat had sailed through

the air and settled about her body. The gun spun out of her reach as she fell on her knees. She fought the rope with a strength that surprised him, but she was no match for Slade.

He hadn't time for gentleness and consideration. The herd was close now and almost in stampede. Picking her up as though she was a sack of feed, he ran to where her pony waited and threw her into the saddle. A quick turn of the rope about her ankles made sure she would stay there. By the time the bawling cattle got to the fence the barbed strands were carefully laid back along a gap big enough to allow for their easy passage.

THE cattle poured through the gap in a mad scramble for the water they craved. The chuck wagon followed and very shortly preparations for night camp were under way. Slade looked at the tired faces of his men and thought that anything justified making rest for them possible.

The drive from Texas had been made short handed. Besides Slade and the China-boy cook there were only four drivers—Red Wallace, a gangling youngster with restless eyes and a shock of bright red hair; Ase Folsom, a surly faced man with the beady eyes of a snake; and two leathery old-timers who sat their saddles like they were glued to them, Mart Green and Dan Murry quarreled constantly between themselves and at times were trying to Slade's patience, but he trusted both to the limit.

It was the shorter of the two oldsters who spurred over to Slade, his voice worry-filled. "Did you cut that fence?"

"I sure did, Mart. What of it?"

Mart Green rubbed a palm across a

hairy jaw. "Nothin', fur's I'm consarned. Only it ain't likely this here rancher wanted his purty fence cut and he might be of a mind to make somethin' of it."

"His girl tried that," Slade said. "She's waiting over there." He nodded toward the horse further down the river, then turned his own horse that way.

She looked at him through hate filled eyes. "This time you've gone too far, Trigger Oliver. When my father and Cole Patterson hear about this, you'll wish you'd never even heard of the Nation."

"That's what I come to ask you about, Miss Fisher. I ain't of a mind to mistreat you but I'd like to cross your range unmolested. If you'll give me your word I won't be bothered, I'll let you go."

"I most certainly won't!" she blazed. "If you cross you're inviting trouble and plenty of it! And you'd better let me go and be quick about it, Trigger Oliver!"

His lips smiled, but not his eyes. "I told you I don't like taking orders," he said, curtly. "And you don't look in a position to give them. I guess I'll save trouble, if I just take you along with us."

Her eyes opened wider and he could see terror spilling from them. "You wouldn't dare!" she gasped.

"That's what you figured when you tried stopping me," he said, roughly. "You thought I couldn't fight a woman. But I can. I can fight the devil and hell itself when I'm being pushed around. You can make it easy on yourself, Miss. But I'm giving the orders until I get my cattle on my own range."

HE RODE back to where the men were waiting, their faces filled with excited curiosity. "Mart, you and Dan collect some

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

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bandanas and fix the ropes on the girl so they won't cut her wrists. But watch her. She's a hell cat."

Mart Green protested. "You surely ain't figgerin' on holding her, Slade? Good God, man, you can't do that!"

Slade built a smoke for which he had little taste. "Did you ever hear of getting a tiger by the tail and not being able to let go, Mart? Well, that's me. I don't want this she-devil, but I got her. I couldn't gun her and I couldn't fist fight her. So I had to tie her up. And now I can't let her go unless we want the whole bunch on our necks, while we're crossing their land. Once we're on our own range, we can scatter the herd and handle what comes."

"The hell you can," Mart muttered. "It'll be like handling a Texas cyclone."

"Some folks is so scary," Dan Murry said sarcastically, "they think every go-devil is a cyclone. I don't need your help if you're squeamish."

"I'll help, Dan." Ase Folsom's eyes were bright as glass beads. "It'll be a pleasure."

Slade watched them, a new worry tugging at him. He was remembering that Ase had a bad reputation where women were concerned. He'd heard girl trouble was his real reason for wanting to come to the Indian Nation. And Ase hadn't seen a pretty girl for months now.

Mart cut into his thoughts. "It looks like trouble to me, Slade."

"I know," Oliver agreed. "Plenty of trouble." His voice took on a deeper note of bitterness as he added, "She called me Trigger, Mart."

Mart grunted like he'd been hit in the solar plexus. "Trigger, eh? Begins to look like somebody round here knows ye, lad, and they ain't honing to have ye fer a neighbor."

Slade shrugged, pretending an indifference he was far from feeling. He'd hoped to make a new start in this country. How much he'd hoped it no one but himself could possibly know. He was a taciturn man, hardened by the violent life he had lived. But he had his share of dreams. And those dreams all had to do with a life of peace and contentment, where a man could let his guns rust and not know fear. Slade Oliver, contrary to most men's opin-

ions, wanted rust on his gun barrels. Now it looked like it wasn't to be just yet.

CHAPTER TWO

A She-Wildcat

SLADE went to the chuck wagon and filled a plate with beans and jerked beef and took it over to where the two men were trying to cope with the girl. Dan was standing, helpless, scratching his head. He didn't know how to fight a girl, either. And the girl was full of fight.

Ase Folsom was enjoying himself. He held the girl's arms behind her and laughed when she kicked at him and Dan. As Slade approached he saw Ase lean down and kiss her on the neck and the sight made him strangely angry. He knew then what he had to do. Ase Folsom and a pretty girl made a combination that spelled too much trouble.

"All right," he said shortly, "get over to chow, both of you. I'll take over here."

Dan dropped his rope quick enough. "You're welcome to," he snorted.

But Ase Folsom's eyes narrowed, hotly. "Ain't getting hoggish, are you, Slade? We all share the work and the hardships. Why not the fun?"

Slade's hands itched to hit the sneering face in front of him. But he restrained the impulse. "I said git, Ase!" His voice was thin and sharp as a razor's edge.

Ase shrugged sullenly and walked away. Slade silently proffered the plate to the girl. She took it and flung the contents squarely in his face. "Eat your own slop, Trigger Oliver!" she cried, hotly. "I wouldn't touch it if I was starving."

Slade took out a soiled handkerchief and wiped the mess from his face. "Being a woman is all that lets you get away with that," he told her, harshly. "But that ain't going to keep you from getting mighty hungry before morning. We got a right long ride to make, Miss Fisher. It'll be smart of you to climb on your horse without more trouble."

She looked at the deadly seriousness of his face and gave up. When she had mounted, as easily as a man, he bound her ankles loosely under the horse's belly. Then he tied her wrists in front of her, using the bandanas to insure against chafing. Her

lips curled as she watched the pains he took.

"Considerate, aren't you? I suppose you spread a blanket for a man to fall on before you shoot him in the back."

Hate came alive in Slade and blazed from his eyes as they raked her. "Anybody ever tell you I shot a man in the back? If they did, they lied."

"They told me how many you killed. Ten at one time, wasn't it, Trigger?" Her voice was taunting.

He stepped back, his unpleasant job finished. Sweat glistened on his brow and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. "Ten is right," he said, heavily. "And I'm going to add another when I find out who's been doing so much talking about me."

Calling Red Wallace over, Slade gave him instructions about bringing on the herd and warned him to be careful not to pick up any of Tom Fisher's stock on the way. He added, acidly, "I got to get this tiger caged before she scratches all our eyes out."

"But suppose they come looking for her?" Red asked.

"Somebody probably will. That's why I'm going on ahead with her. If you run into any of the searchers, tell them she gave us permission and that she's up ahead with me. If they don't believe you—then it will be up to you, Red."

Red nodded. "We'll handle whatever comes up."

Slade mounted, almost too tired to fork the horse. He took up the lead rope on the girl's mount and started off through the gathering darkness.

THE ride was a grueling one for both man and girl. By the time they reached another fence, gleaming whitely in the pale moonlight, Slade was almost reeling from fatigue and lack of sleep. Six weeks on the trail, with an average night's sleep cut down to two or three hours, had gaunted him to near emaciation. The responsibilities of a trail boss were many. He had to be constantly alert to the dangers of stampedes, attacks by Indians or outlaws, and at the same time fighting against discouragement and dissatisfaction among his men. He quits having normal feelings and reactions and becomes something of a machine, doing automatically what has to be done.

That was the way Slade felt about the girl, riding silently beside him. She wasn't anything to quicken his interest or stir his sympathy. She was just a job to do and a damn unpleasant one. He was glad that the ride was about over.

He got down and cut the wires again. After another mile the shack he had built before leaving for Texas loomed up in the night. With a sigh of relief he pulled up before the door and almost fell off his horse.

Tired as he was, Slade stood before the door for a moment, savoring the feeling of being at home at last. Through the long, hard months he had kept this high moment before him—the moment when he would open the padlock. The chain he had slipped through a round hole in the door and around the lintel post. He even forgot the girl and stepped across the door sill into the single room of the cabin.

He knew just where he had left matches and the oil lamp and quickly a warm light flooded the room. Pridefully he looked about. He'd done a good job when he built that cabin, cinching the cracks with mud so thoroughly that little dust or rain had blown in and the puncheon floor was still clean and hard. He shook the blankets in the bunk and only a faint odor of dust was noticeable. A good job . . .

Then he remembered the girl waiting outside. He hurried out. She drooped tiredly in the saddle and for a second he thought she was asleep. But when he untied her feet she slid to the ground, unaided.

But her legs buckled under her and she might have fallen if he hadn't grabbed her. Half angrily he picked her up and carried her inside and dumped her into the bunk. When he untied her wrists she rolled over and fell asleep, or pretended to.

Slade had first planned to leave her there and ride back to join his men. But the temptation of sleep was too strong for him. When he had brought in water he locked the door chain again. Then after he had cared for the horses he took a blanket and rolled up in it under a tree near the door. Before he could straighten out his legs he was fast asleep.

THE sun in his eyes woke him the next morning. He was shocked to see how late it was, and surprised to smell the fra-

grant odors of coffee and bacon drifting from the cabin. He'd left the place well supplied and now he was glad he had. He was plenty hungry. When he'd washed up he unlocked the chain, then knocked on the door before pushing it open.

The girl was working at the stove and her voice was brittle as she greeted him. "Your manners are perfect, Trigger Oliver," she said, sarcastically. "I suppose you will ask politely if you might have breakfast with me. And what if I refuse you?"

He pulled out a chair for her, then got one for himself. He was grinning as he answered, "I'd eat anyway. I'm starved."

She hesitated briefly, then sat down opposite him and they ate silently. Not until he had satisfied his hunger did he really look at her. Then he was almost startled to see how pretty she was. Her hair was neither brown nor red, but a mixture of both. Her eyes were so bright a brown, they looked like chips of polished mahogany.

She held herself erect with a fearlessness he liked. Or was it just bravado? Last night he had been too tired to notice or care. But now he had the sudden intuition that all along she had been horribly afraid but determined not to let him know it. He felt a faint stirring of admiration for her, mixed with regret that things were like they were between them.

She looked up and misread the softened look in his eyes. Fear leaped into hers and she said, hastily, "I hope you realize that my dad will kill you for this, Trigger. And every white man on the reservation will want to help him."

He shrugged. "Men have tried to kill me before. But I'm still alive."

"Don't brag," she cried, scornfully. "You won't always get away with killing and robbing and riding rough shod over everybody! Some day somebody will stop you and I hope I'm there to see it, Trigger Oliver!"

He rose, placed his palms flat on the table, and leaned toward her. "I don't like that name you call me," he said, softly. "I'd fight a man who used it. I'd admire for you to stop it."

She drew back, startled at the quiet intensity of his voice. "You don't like it!" she mocked, bitterly. "I suppose you think

I like the way you've treated me. I suppose you think my father will like it, or Cole Patterson!"

He said, curiously, "That's twice you've mentioned Cole Patterson. Am I supposed to be afraid of him?"

"You'd better be. I—he's going to marry me. And he most certainly will want to kill you for what you've done to me."

He smiled cynically as he built a smoke. "You mean he'll use it as an excuse for killing me. I know about Cole Patterson. He's trying to organize the big ranchers and keep everybody else out of the Nation. He didn't want me to get this lease and he'll run me out if he can."

"That's not true," she denied, quickly. "Cole and my father and other decent men are only trying to make this country a fit place to live in and to keep out outlaws and gunslingers. . . ."

She stopped at the sound of his laugh. It was an ugly thing, that laugh. Just as Slade meant it to be. For it expressed his thoughts and they were ugly, having to do with what he knew about Cole Patterson. He threw down his smoke in disgust and ground it into the floor with his heel.

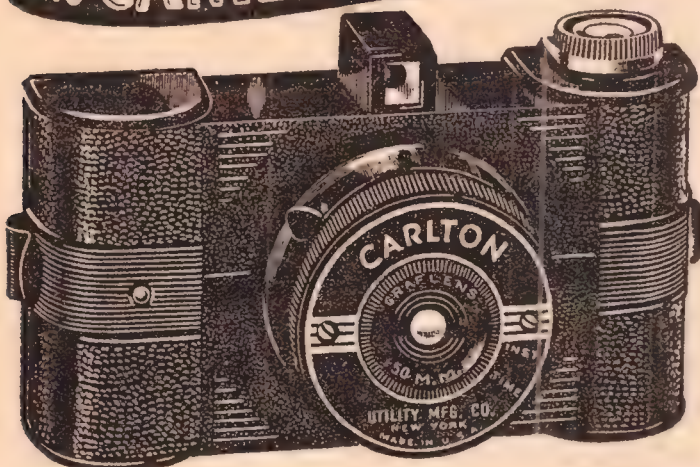
"If it's men like Cole Patterson you're depending on to make the Indian Nations a fit place to live in, all I can say is the devil will need a stopper for his nose, for even he won't be able to stand the smell of it." He slammed out of the door in disgust and went to saddle the horses.

WHEN he returned she was cleaning the dishes and restoring neatness to the cabin. He sat in a chair, tilted against the wall, and watched her. She was quick and deft in her movements and entirely feminine in spite of the mannish clothes she wore. Slade became conscious of a queer quickening of his pulses. It had been many months since Slade had been around a woman. Until now that had been unimportant but suddenly it seemed the most important thing in his life. The strange emotions stirring in him alarmed him and as usual to be alarmed was a prelude to anger with Slade Oliver.

He brought the chair legs down with such suddenness that the girl jumped nervously. "Let the place alone," he snapped, "and get the hell out of here! Your horse is waiting outside!"

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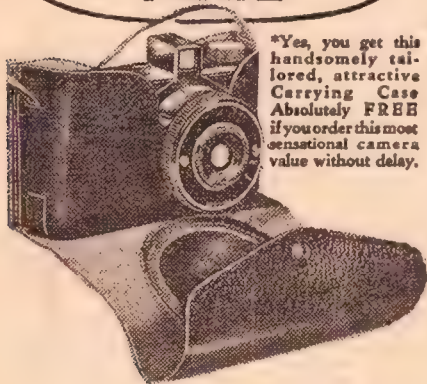


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She silently picked up her sombrero, then walked over and held out her hands to him. He looked down at her, fighting against an almost overpowering urge to touch her. "I said get out," he muttered, thickly.

Surprise was mirrored in her mahogany eyes. She looked at him hesitantly and then stammered, "You mean—free?"

He nodded, jerkily. She opened the door and saw the saddled pony, then laughed, triumphantly. "Getting cold feet, Trigger?" she taunted. "Too bad you didn't think sooner about what you were getting yourself into."

Slade's control snapped. His hand went out to her arm, swung her about to face him. "Listen, you!" he said, thickly. "If you think I'm afraid of Cole Patterson or your father or the whole damn Nation you're wrong. Just to make sure you do, I'll prove it. . . !"

He swept her roughly against him and kissed her violently. A long, hard kiss that told of the consuming hunger in him. Then abruptly he pushed her toward the door.

"Now tell that to Cole Patterson. That ought to give him something to gun me for."

She picked up her hat that had fallen to the floor and replaced it. Color was high in her face but her voice was steady as she said, "You are a rash man, Trigger Oliver. If Cole doesn't kill you for that, I will."

He waited inside until the sound of her horse died away. Then he mounted his own horse and started back the way he had come the night before. His mind was full of the recent developments.

He hoped he hadn't miscalculated the arrival of his herd at the fence. If he hadn't, the cattle would be on home ground before the girl could spread the alarm. He squinted at the afternoon sun and figured it would be night at least before Fisher or Patterson could get the word of his arrival. He hoped there would be no trouble until then.

If they came looking for trouble, as they surely would, he'd be ready for them. He heaved a heavy sigh for a lost dream and laughed a little at the joke of Slade Oliver thinking he could ever get away from gun fighting.

CHAPTER THREE

Gun Rust

THE herd arrived shortly before sundown and soon were bedded down contentedly on Mashed O land. Then with whoops of joy the men raced to the cabin for the hot meal Cooky had waiting.

They ate wolfishly and silently and not until they had pushed back their plates and rolled smokes did the subject of the girl come up. Then Red asked casually, "What did you do with the tiger, Slade?"

"Sent her home," Slade answered tersely.

Ase Folsom's little eyes lit up queerly as he raised his head and sniffed. "Seems to me I smell woman in here. I bet you wasn't in any hurry getting rid of her."

His tone said even more than his words. All Slade's stored up dislike of the man exploded in him. Jumping to his feet so quickly his chair crashed to the floor, he shot out a hard fist straight for Ase's jaw. Man and chair went over backwards with a jar that shook the house.

When Ase got to his feet he had his gun out and there was murder in his eyes. But before he could level the barrel, Slade's weapon had jumped like magic into his hands and Slade's voice, deadly quiet, was saying, "Put it up, Ase. And take back what you said or have it crammed down your throat."

Ase holstered his gun, muttering, "Hell's fire, I just figured you'd be smart enough to do what I'd have done in your place."

Slade accepted the doubtful apology, but opened his money belt and took out some bills and tossed them to Folsom. "There's the bonus I promised you. Take your choice of the remuda and git."

Ase pocketed the money and picked up his hat. At the door he turned and there was ugly threat in his voice. "It's not my fight, but I might make it mine, Oliver. It's guys like you that I like to see took down." He then slammed the door and left.

There was uneasy silence in the room for a moment. Then Mart Green said, "You sure go looking for peace the rough way. Do we do night herding tonight?"

"We do," Slade said, shortly, "unless



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we want our beef drifting back onto Fisher's range and going to feed the Injuns. Tomorrow we'll patch that fence. But I'll take first watch, for I've had some sleep."

THE next morning Slade and Red rode into the little town of Canadian City for supplies and some wire to fix Fisher's fence. There was a general store, the Cheyenne agency office, and a small garrison where a handful of soldiers were quartered. After their purchases were made and loaded on the pack horse, Red and Slade made for the bar.

The bar was crowded with a few soldiers off duty, a half dozen cattlemen and others who might be anything from outlaws to honest trail drivers. The few tables were full, too, so the two elbowed their way to a place at the end of the short bar and ordered whiskey. The bartender set the bottle and glasses before them, then eyed Slade queerly.

"You're Oliver, ain't you? So you're back. Aiming to stay this time?"

His voice carried clearly across the room. Slade heard a chair scrape behind him and the back of his neck tingled but he didn't turn around. He answered the bartender in the same loud voice with which he'd been questioned.

"That's right. I'm back, and I'm aiming to stay."

A voice at his elbow said softly, "Don't be so sure, Trigger. You might be changing your mind about staying."

Slade turned, unhurriedly, the glass of whiskey in his hand. He was facing a stocky, broad shouldered man with eyes like shiny pieces of coal.

"I'm damn sure, Patterson," Slade said, coolly. "And just to start off right I'd be much obliged if you got my name straight. It's Slade Oliver, in case you don't know."

Cole Patterson laughed, an ugly sound splitting the sudden quiet of the room. "I've heard you were called Trigger down in Texas. I guess that's good enough."

"Not for me!" Slade's hand moved like the dart of a snake and the liquor in his glass splashed full in Cole Patterson's face.

Slade followed instantly with a punch that buried his fist in the man's paunchy stomach. He folded like an accordion and fell to the floor.

SLADE waited, stopped for the moment. He couldn't hit a man while he lay on his face on the floor. He suspected Patterson was feigning hurt, stalling for time. His suspicions were confirmed as the men around the door were roughly pushed aside and a U. S. cavalry officer wearing a captain's bars stepped forward.

"What's going on here?"

Before Slade could speak Cole Patterson rolled over and got up. One look at his face and Slade knew the fight was over for that time. The big rancher just brushed off his clothes and muttered, "Nothing I can't handle, Captain Forbes. But it'll keep."

Slade was disappointed. He wanted to get this over with but plainly enough Cole Patterson chose to fight in his own way. His eyes were like little black augers boring through Slade as he said, "Take warning, Oliver, and leave the Nations."

Slade only laughed. "I'll be seeing you, Patterson. And don't forget my name!"

Riding out of town, Slade and Red were silent for a while. Finally Red drawled, "Sort of looks like you ain't going to be very popular round here, Slade. What the hell's biting these jaspers, anyway?"

Slade thumb prodded his hat back off his forehead before answering. "This is Injun country now, Red, but it won't be long." Then he added, "It's too rich a land not to attract homeseekers and little men like me who see a chance to get the start they want. But so far the big ranchers, a few fellows like Patterson and Fisher, have had things their own way. They want to keep it like that."

"Range hogs, eh? But if this Fisher wants to get rid of you, looks like you furnished him with plenty of ammunition when you hogtied his girl."

Slade nodded, soberly. "Patterson, too. He figures on marrying her. She warned me that they'd gun me for it. I wonder why Patterson didn't polish me off today and save his breath making threats?"

"Saving lead, maybe. Or else she hasn't seen him yet."

"That must be it," Slade decided. "And Fisher might have been off buying or something. When he gets back the lead will start flying." He added, bitterly, "And to think I wanted to let my guns rust."



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They reached the broken place in the fence and made quick repairs. Neither of the old timers showed up and Slade became worried. "I told them to stay close," he complained. Then he heard Red utter a startled oath. "What the hell, Slade? Ain't that a saddled horse over there?"

They found Dan's horse in the herd, grazing with trailing reins. And nearby was the old man, lying unconscious in the tall grass, the ground under him was a dark red. He'd been shot through the chest, but was still alive.

Looking down at the pitiful figure, Slade felt his throat tighten until it ached. "Damn them, Red. Why didn't they save that lead for me? They didn't have anything against Dan."

CHAPTER FOUR

Whiskey Frame-Up

THEY did what they could for Dan, but the old man failed to rally. After an anxious night, when Slade divided his worry between the injured man and what might happen next, he sent Red into Canadian City for a doctor.

About mid morning the sound of hard ridden horses took Slade to the door.

Standing in the doorway he watched the three riders sweep into the yard and pull rein. He knew at once that one of them was Tom Fisher. He was a big man with a ruddy face and a shock of long white hair that fell almost to his shoulders. Slade's blood tingled. Was this the show-down he'd been expecting?

The whitehaired Fisher was boiling mad and plainly controlling himself.

"We come to warn you, Oliver!" he roared. "We're not tolerating your kind here. You got twenty-four hours to git!"

Slade smiled, his gaze holding the angry eyes of Tom Fisher. "Or what?" he asked.

"Or be run out!" Fisher's control seemed to be slipping. "I ought to drill you anyway, you thieving coyote! Would, if I hadn't promised Holly . . ." He checked himself with an effort and added, grimly, "We know about you, Oliver. We know you're a slick fingered gunman and you come in here making trouble, cutting a man's fences and stealing his beef. . . !

"If you're here by tomorrow sunset we're coming over to run you out!"

Wheeling, he rode away, followed by his two men. The rannies, Slade saw, rode in a sidewise position so they could keep their eyes slanted on him.

RED came back about noon without a doctor. "He was drunk, for one thing, and wouldn't come for another."

"What did he say, Red?"

"If you want his exact words, Slade, I'll try to give them to you. He said, 'My good man, we have no laws to speak of in the Nation except one that commands my most profound respect. That is the law of self preservation. I'm sorry but I can't help your friend.' What the hell was he talking about, Slade?"

Slade's nerves tightened and he could feel a chill creep along his spine. "I think he was talking about Cole Patterson, Red. He's declared open war against us and disinterested parties are taking ring side seats on the fence."

Red said, sourly, "And I've seen jaspers knocked off fences, too. Slade, I saw Ase Folsom today. He was drinking at the garrison bar. With Cole Patterson."

The tense feeling in Slade tightened until his whole body ached with it. But all he said was, "I reckon a man can drink with who he pleases."

"I'm going in after that sawbones, Red. And this time he's coming."

But in Canadian City he couldn't find the doctor. The surly barman admitted grudgingly that he'd gone out to the Cheyenne camp with an Indian friend. Slade forked his horse again and headed for the Indian village.

At the edge of the camp he saw Holly Fisher. She was talking to a young buck but stopped at sight of him.

"I heard you were leaving, Trigger Oliver. Right away."

He guessed she was baiting him and said flatly, "Then you heard wrong, Miss Fisher. I'm not!"

"Then you're a fool!" she cried, and there was anxiety as well as anger in her flashing eyes. "Dad has sworn to kill you for stealing his beef! You've got to leave!"

Slade wanted to hear more so he took out the makings and started to build a

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smoke. "Just day before yesterday wasn't it, Miss Fisher, you wanted bad to see me killed. Ain't changed your mind?"

"Not on your account," she said, hotly, while color stained her cheeks. "I didn't tell him because Dad's excitable and he'd try to kill you and . . ."

She stopped as Slade finished for her. "And maybe get killed. Too bad you can't get Cole Patterson to look at it that way, Miss Fisher. He's working right hard at promoting war between your dad and me."

"I don't believe you!" she cried. "You came in here and started all this, Trigger Oliver! And I'm going to find some way of stopping it."

She wheeled and galloped away. Slade went on in search of the doctor.

IT TOOK considerable argument and some gun bluffing by way of persuasion before Slade was able to start back for his cabin with the bleary eyed medico. As they left the camp he saw a white man duck behind a lodge and wondered if he could be right in thinking it was Ase Folsom.

Cold water and hot coffee sobered up the sawbones enough to be able to operate on Dan. Slade balanced the chunk of lead that came out of the old man's chest and said softly to Red, "A forty-four. Of course more men than Ase carries that kind. But I'm hunting up Ase for a talk."

Slade had just finished saddling the next morning when a half dozen troopers, led by Captain Forbes, rode into the yard. They dismounted on sharp order from the captain.

"You're under arrest, Oliver," the officer said, briskly. "I hope you'll come along quietly without trouble."

Unalarmed, Slade looked at the rifles and grinned. "Looks like you're ready for trouble, Captain. But what am I being arrested for?"

"Whiskey peddling to the Indians," the officer said.

Surprised at the charge Slade protested. "How could I peddle whiskey, Captain? I haven't got a drop on the place."

"We'll see for ourselves about that, Oliver. I was told you were carrying a saddle bag full yesterday."

At his order a soldier searched the

Trigger Oliver—Death's Strawboss

saddle pockets. To Slade's astonishment he held up a full bottle of Scotch whiskey.

Slade was too mad to speak. Besides, what good were denials? The frame-up had likely been made good. But he was yet to find out how good.

IN CANADIAN CITY he was taken to the Indian agent's office for a preliminary hearing. The witnesses were two Cheyenne bucks, both of whom swore they had bought whiskey from Slade the day before. Slade had never seen either of them. When he said so the agent told him, "They were both drunk and caused a disturbance in town last night. We've got to put a stop to this peddling whiskey to the Indians before something serious happens."

The redskins stuck to their lie. He brought it in his saddle bags, they said, and came right into the Cheyenne camp to sell it. When Slade explained his mission at the camp the captain told a trooper, "Send in Miss Fisher."

She came in, slender and straight as a young birch tree, and Slade's pulse quickened at sight of her in spite of his anger. She never even glanced his way but faced the captain calmly and answered him in a low, but distinct, voice.

"Miss Fisher, you saw this man, Slade Oliver, yesterday?"

"I did, Captain Forbes."

"Will you tell us where?"

"At the Cheyenne camp. I had gone there to hire a rider to help my father. As I was leaving I saw him."

"What was he doing?"

"He was talking to Red Fox." She gestured toward one of the Cheyennes who had lied. "I saw him pass the Indian a bottle."

Slade jumped to his feet in outraged astonishment. There was such a roaring in his ears he could hardly hear his own voice. "But you know better than that! You heard me ask for the doctor!"

She looked at him then and her eyes were cold as agates. "The doctor left the camp with me. You never spoke to either of us."

Slade understood then and he felt as if he'd had all the wind knocked out of him. This was Holly Fisher's frame and she was making it good. And the old sawbones had

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been fixed or she wouldn't dare include him.

He bowed mockingly, in spite of the trembling rage that shook him. "You don't brag, do you, Miss Fisher? When you make a threat, you make good on it."

A flash of the mahogany eyes was his only answer. They held him for trial in the Kansas federal court and fixed his bail at five thousand dollars. It might as well have been a million. Slade knew he was Kansas bound when he heard the cell door lock behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Showdown With Lead

THE JAIL was in an upper story of the Indian agent's office. Slade's cell was a small room with bars on the window and a steel barred door. Slade spent a long afternoon sitting on the cot, thinking.

He thought of a lot of things, none of which would seem to do him any good. He thought of Patterson and wondered if he had a part in this. Of Ase Folsom with his beady eyes and his snake's mind and what a good tool Ase would make in the hands of Patterson. But mostly he thought about Holly Fisher and her treachery, until his anger burned out and a reluctant admiration for her took its place.

She had outsmarted him, all right. She had sand in her craw, that girl. She knew there could be no fight between him and Fisher if he was in jail. But how far would she go with the farce?

He thought he knew the answer to that, too. She would go all the way. And whether or not Patterson was mixed up in the plot he would gain by it. He would be rid of the one man he was afraid of and be free to go on with his nefarious schemes. That thought was so unpleasant that Slade clenched his hands in impotent fury. And a daring plan began to take shape in his mind.

It was early twilight when the jailer, a loose mouthed man with watery eyes, brought him a supper tray. The lantern in the corridor hadn't yet been lighted and shadows filled the little cell. Slade hugged the wall beside the door of iron bars.

The jailer thrust the tray under the bars.

Trigger Oliver—Death's Strawboss

"Come and get it," he invited. Slade made no move nor sound.

Peering through the bars, the jailer made a startled exclamation when he couldn't see Slade. He hastily lit the lantern, then held it close against the bars and peered closer. "Where the hell are you?" he muttered.

It was what Slade was waiting for. As quick as greased lightning he threw himself against the bars, one hand streaking through to grab the startled jailer by the throat. The other hand grabbed the man's pistol butt. The lantern crashed to the floor and went out. The yell that started in the fellow's throat died to a gurgle as Slade's hand tightened on his wind pipe and the gun barrel bored deep into his soft belly.

"Unlock the door," Slade ordered.

With shaking hands the man unlocked the gate and let Slade drag him in and tie his hands with his belt. Then he crammed the man's bandana into his mouth and secured it there with his own neckerchief. Slade then locked the cell door again and walked down the stairs, a free man.

A couple of horses stood waiting at the hitch rack, near the store. Slade selected one and headed for the Mashed O. He'd get his own horse and return this one by Red.

THE shortest way to the cabin was to cut across a corner of the Fisher range. When Slade reached the wire gap that served Tom Fisher as a gate he hesitated a second, then swung the wire open and rode through. He wouldn't have to pass too close to the house and he knew Fisher kept no night herders. He didn't need them, with that fence.

He had ridden no more than a mile when he heard the sound of a shot and drew sharp rein to listen. More shots in staccato succession split the quiet of the night into fragments. Then a woman's scream!

Before the echo of that scream had ended Slade was riding toward the sound, raking the sides of the horse with his spurs.

A bright moon was shining, making enough light to throw every shadow into distinct relief. A half mile, and the land dipped abruptly into a huge buffalo wallow. Below him, in the center of the big bowl, a weird scene was being enacted. Cattle milled about in a frightened circle, bawling their terror, while around them

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were a half dozen figures on horse. Slade watched them, puzzled. The men rode like Plains Indians. Then the truth dawned on him. The raiders were Indians! Drunk Indians! For he could see some of the shadowy figures swaying and weaving as they rode. And they were shooting wildly, some into the herd, some into the air. But if that was Holly, where was she?

Then he thought he saw her. Two figures struggled on the ground, beside a dark shadow that must be a dead horse. One of the figures was pathetically slight compared to the other and was being pulled toward a waiting horse. With a yell that Slade felt must be heard above that bedlam he charged towards her.

A bullet whizzed past his ear and he saw the orange flare blossom from the ground just ahead of him. He didn't dare return the shot for fear of hitting the girl. All he could do was time the next one and hit the ground in the same split second.

He lit running and came up against the man like two stone walls crashing together. Slade was on top as they went down and he lashed at the head under him with the gun still in his hand. But the fellow was fighting like a wild cat and the blow was only a glancing one. A knee came up and caught Slade in the groin. For a second he was helpless, his hands refusing to do his bidding. The man under him rolled free and his gun blazed, the bullet passing so close Slade felt its tug at his clothing. Dimly he saw Holly Fisher raise her booted foot and kick the man in the face before he could fire again.

BY THEN Slade's paralysis passed and he threw himself on the man again. This time he got his hands on his throat and felt a savage joy surge through him as he dug into the soft glands with his thumbs. The body under him writhed and thrashed.

Half dazed, Slade stumbled to his feet. Then for the first time he saw who the unconscious man was. It was Ase Folsom!

Remembering the others, Slade snatched up his gun and looked around. There was nothing in sight but the scattering herd.

Faintly they heard shots again. Slade listened attentively. "That sounded like army rifles."

From the wire gap came the thunder

Trigger Oliver—Death's Strawboss

of horses and Holly looked that way. "They're coming," she said. Then, as though just remembering she asked, "How did you get out of jail?"

"There's ways," he said, tightly. "You got another lie ready to send me back?"

She caught her breath nervously. "Jails are sometimes the safest places to be."

Ase Folsom sat up, groaning, just as the cavalymen and ranchers swept up. Tom Fisher was the first to dismount and even in the moonlight they could see his face was ashen with fear. "Holly!" he cried, "What happened? We stopped the Indians and two were shot. They said it happened here." Then he saw Ase and demanded, "Who is this?"

"He's the man who helped get the Cheyennes drunk and then came with them to raid your herd, Dad," she told him. "And they would have succeeded if it hadn't been for Slade Oliver. He got here just in time."

"Slade Oliver?" Captain Forbes swung about sharply to pick out the figure of Slade. "What are you doing out of jail?"

"She just told you," Slade said harshly.

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.44 WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Now, Miss Fisher, suppose you tell him what I was doing in jail."

"All right, I will," she said, crisply, a little to his surprise. "I lied to you, Captain, to put him there so he couldn't kill anyone or be killed. But I'm sure it was this man Folsom who sold the whiskey and put that bottle in Oliver's saddle pocket."

"But," the officer's voice was full of doubt, "Folsom works for Oliver."

"Not any more," Slade put in. "For three days he's been drawing pay from Cole Patterson." That was a shot in the dark but it struck home.

"That's a lie!" Patterson cried. "I don't know anything about any of this!"

Ase Folsom got to his feet suddenly. "The hell you don't!" he snarled, like a cornered animal. "It was your idea and you supplied the whiskey and paid me . . ."

That was as far as he got. A gun blazed in Cole Patterson's hand and Ase Folsom crumpled down onto the ground.

An instant of stunned silence held the group. Then a soldier by Patterson grabbed him and he was quickly disarmed.

"That was plain murder, Patterson!" Captain Forbes cried. "You must be crazy!"

"Like a murdering coyote is crazy," Slade said. "I've a hunch, Captain, you find he's been selling the Indians whiskey."

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Trigger Oliver—Death's Strawboss

right along. Or buying favors with it, which is all the same. He made a lot of trouble whiskey running when I was a member of the border patrol a few years back. That's one reason he didn't want me coming in here."

WHEN the troopers had taken their prisoner and his victim away Tom Fisher turned to Slade and offered his hand. "I reckon I had you wrong, Oliver. But Patterson painted you mighty black. Said you had all Texas scared of you."

Slade winced a little. "He meant the outlaws. Border patrolling is a tough job and a man don't last long at it unless he gets to be mighty quick on the trigger. I got to be quick and that's where I got that nickname I hate so."

"Trigger?" Holly asked. "But why do you hate it so?"

"I guess I couldn't make you understand that," he said, slowly. "But a man gets tired of violence and bloodshed. He gets to feeling like folks are afraid of him and he comes to be a little afraid of himself. I come out here wanting to build me a new life without any reminders of the other. But I found Patterson had spoiled things for me before I got here."

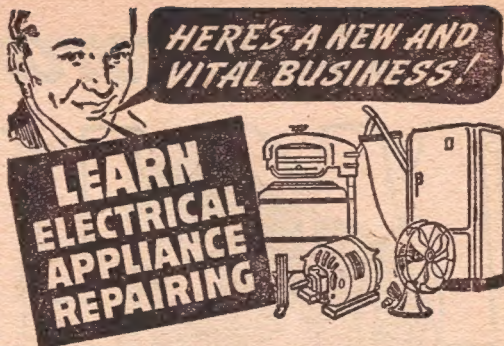
He was watching Holly, wondering how she felt after hearing the truth about Patterson. And thinking that his cabin on the creek needed a woman in it, to be complete. A woman with sand in her craw, like this slender girl. And then she raised her face to his and he could see her eyes, luminous in the moonlight, and brave.

"I'm not afraid of you, Slade Oliver," she said, softly. And then proudly, she added, "Nor with you."

Tom Fisher chose that moment to say, "Come along to the house for some coffee, neighbor. Fighting men like you is just what this country needs."

They walked through the moonlight to the house, saying little. But Slade Oliver felt he was overflowing with contentment. Peace was all right, but there was nothing like a good fight to give a man a feeling of satisfaction. A fight where there was something at stake—something like the girl walking beside him. A man would be a fool, nothing less, to let rust spoil his gun barrel.

THE END



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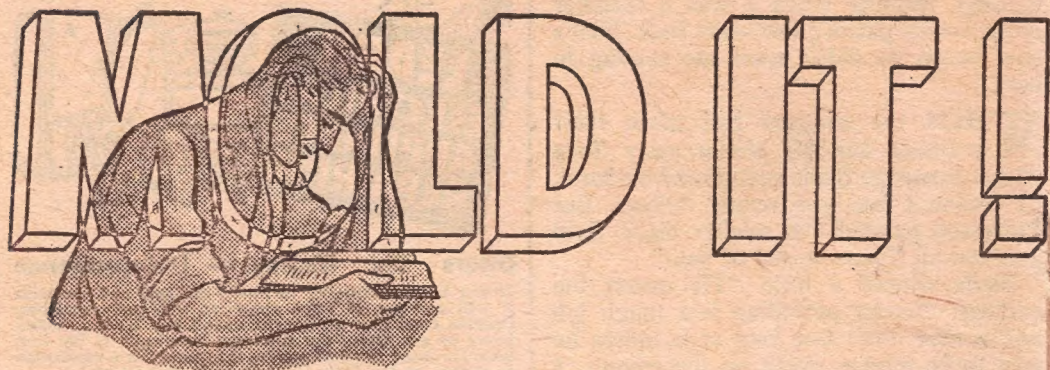
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